

Libya confirms it “bought peace” with the US

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In the murky world of international diplomacy, truth, when it makes an appearance, is usually an unwelcome visitor. It cuts through the fog of duplicity and lies through which official political circles seek to conceal their real interests and exposes the essential relationships and motives behind events.

Thus, when Libyan Prime Minister Shukri Ghanem blurted out on *BBC* radio on February 25 that his government had “bought peace”, and did not in fact accept responsibility for either the 1988 bombing of the Pan Am 103 flight over Lockerbie, or the 1984 killing of British policewoman Yvonne Fletcher, an essential fact of Libya’s reintegration into the “international community” was exposed.

Only in August of last year did the Libyan government officially accept responsibility for the actions of Abdel Basset al-Megrahi, who was found guilty of the Pan Am bombing by a special court in the Netherlands and sentenced to 27 years imprisonment.

This, combined with its pledge to surrender its “weapons of mass destruction” and aid the Bush administration in its supposed war on terror, had afforded the Libyan regime a newfound respectability. Libya had agreed to maintain silence on the numerous provocations and attacks carried out by the United States and Britain against Libya over decades, while collaborating with the US drive to establish its control over the Middle East.

WPC Yvonne Fletcher was shot outside the Libyan Embassy in London in 1984, during a demonstration held by opponents of the Libyan government of Muammar Gadhaffi. Fletcher’s shooting, simultaneous with a burst of machine gun fire from the embassy that injured ten other people, triggered an eleven-day stand-off between armed British police and the Libyan diplomatic staff. In the end the siege was lifted after the Libyan government surrounded the British embassy in Tripoli. The two countries’ diplomatic staffs were sent home, and diplomatic relations severed.

The crisis emerged at a point when the Libyan government was increasingly being targeted by NATO and the US. The US was seeking to increase pressure on Libya as part of its “roll back” strategy directed against the Soviet Union and countries who relied on it for arms supplies. Over the next period, the limited backing given previously by the Gadhaffi regime to national liberation struggles such as those in Ireland and Palestine was used to turn Libya into a “pariah” state.

Libya was also accused of having directly orchestrated terrorist attacks, especially the 1988 attack on Pan Am 103. Though this was initially blamed on Palestinian groups, by 1991 Libya was being held responsible and United Nations sanctions were imposed against the oil-rich desert state of five million people.

Isolated and facing economic ruin, Gadhaffi’s government spent the 1990s trying to find a way to reintegrate itself into the world economy and remove the sanctions that prevented much needed investment in the country’s oil industry. In 1999 Gadhaffi handed over compensation to the family of Yvonne Fletcher and offered to put two Libyan officials on trial for the Lockerbie atrocity in the “neutral” venue of Camp Zeist in the Netherlands. UN sanctions imposed in 1992 were promptly suspended, and a trickle of predominantly European investment followed, accompanied by visits from European dignitaries.

At the Zeist trial and in the subsequent appeal, the flimsy character of the case against the Lockerbie accused was clear. Only al-Megrahi was found guilty, and Libya offered to pay compensation to the families of those killed at Lockerbie, provided that a process for the removal of all economic sanctions was agreed. Last summer, in a letter to the United Nations, Libya also announced that it “accepted responsibility” for the actions of its agents and renounced terrorism.

Despite being included on George Bush’s “axis of evil”, it became clear that following September 11, 2001, the Gadhaffi government had begun to provide the US and UK with intelligence valuable to their escalating warmongering in the Middle East. Libya also recently gave British intelligence details of all the weaponry it had sold to the Irish Republican Army in the early 1970s.

Last December events speeded up. Gadhaffi and his entourage of investment-oriented business chiefs provided their most valuable service yet to London and Washington by renouncing “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD). This gave a much needed boost to Bush and Blair’s “war on terror”, at a time when both leaders were facing intractable domestic opposition to the war. Both claimed the Libyan move as a vindication of the invasion of Iraq, pressuring “rogue” regimes to abandon their weaponry. Inspectors for the UN and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), were invited into Libya to examine and dismantle elementary weapons operations. By the end of January 2004, Libya had handed over

25 tonnes of “weapons programme components” for shipment to the US.

The Libyan move particularly served to isolate Iran and Syria. Libyan compliance with US demands was contrasted in the world’s media with Syrian and Iranian reluctance to offer the IAEA and the UN unfettered access to such nuclear facilities as they possess. Both Syria and Iran are likely to be the next targets of US aggression. The Bush administration has successfully pressed for the acceptance of “triggers” which can be used to sanction new provocations against these regimes when required.

In response to Libyan assistance, the US accelerated moves to remove sanctions and a ban on US citizens visiting Libya. Libya was praised by the US State Department, while a Congressional delegation led by Republican Curt Weldon arrived in Tripoli, in the first US military plane to land in Libya since Gadhaffi came to power in 1969. Weldon enthused that he was “very excited and pleased” about the trajectory of Libyan policy, which “exceeds our expectations.”

Libyan diplomats have been busy too. Libyan Foreign Minister Abdul Rahman Mohammed Shalgam visited London to meet with his British counterpart, Jack Straw. Straw told the press that “we’ve always regarded Libya as a good country” and that he regretted that there had been “difficulties” in the past. A meeting between Gadhaffi and Prime Minister Tony Blair was proposed.

The British press, used to describing Gadhaffi as a “mad dog”, also caught the pro-Libya line. Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* commented on a possible meeting between Blair and Gadhaffi, “If that’s the price to be paid for peace, then so be it.”

Perceptively, Simon Jenkins, writing in *The Times*, pointed that that Gadhaffi “realises not that Washington is strong but that it and London are suddenly weak. They are desperate to find ‘world threatening’ weapons anywhere on earth that they could claim to have disarmed.”

This is the context of Ghanem’s comments. In an interview with the *BBC’s* influential *Today* radio programme, the former economist and head of OPEC, who was brought into the Libyan government to push forward a privatisation programme, claimed that he agreed with theories that questioned whether the bullet that killed WPC Fletcher was fired from the Libyan Embassy at all. Even more controversially, Ghanem went on to state that Libya “thought it was easier for us to buy peace and this is why we agreed to compensation” for Lockerbie relatives. Ghanem was backed up by Foreign Minister Shalgam, who told *Al Jazeera* that Libya took “responsibility for the actions and activities of its officials...We did not say we accepted responsibility for the bombing of Pan Am.”

Ghanem’s embarrassing frankness threatened to very publicly raise the unanswered and deeply sensitive questions of who bombed Pan Am 103 and why. It immediately reverberated around the world.....but only for a day. The British government downplayed the comments, insisting that Libya

had made numerous other statements accepting responsibility for Lockerbie. The US government temporarily suspended plans to lift the ban on US citizens travelling to Libya, while State Department official Richard Boucher demanded a retraction.

Within 24 hours the Libyan news agency *Jana* complied, announcing that “Recent statements contradicting or casting doubt on these positions are inaccurate and regrettable.” *Jana* republished the text of its August 2003 letter to the UN which included the deliberately ambiguous formulation that “Libya as a sovereign state, has facilitated the bringing to justice of the two suspects charged with the bombing of Pan Am 103, and accepts responsibility for the actions of its officials.”

For its part, the British government wrote off the whole affair as a “blip” on the road to Libyan rehabilitation. The US promptly dropped the travel ban, and indicated again that removing sanctions was only a matter of time, while a posse of oil executives set off for Tripoli. Part of the pressure for a US rapprochement with Libya has been concerns among oil companies Amerada Hess, Marathon and Conoco that their European rivals were laying claim to Libya’s considerable oil reserves.

Behind Ghanem’s comments and the vague wording of the UN letter, which allows Libya room to deny that it organised the attack on Pan Am 103, is the contradiction between what the Libyan government says to the world’s press and what it says to the Libyan population.

Media access is still largely controlled by the government. Although satellite TV and the Internet are making considerable inroads into the state’s media monopoly, the government has stuck internally to the line that al-Megrahi has effectively been kidnapped by the West. Any departure from this would expose to ordinary Libyans the fact that al-Megrahi, currently in a specially-constructed isolation unit in a Glasgow and reportedly suicidal, has been sacrificed by his own government and its “Great Leader” in pursuit of the oil, tourism and agricultural investment and international influence craved by the Libyan elite.



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