

Blair's visit to Libya: It's about oil, Got it?

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27 March 2004

Those who were taken in by the moralistic posturing of the US and British governments in their war propaganda against Iraq would do well to consider Thursday's visit by British Prime Minister Tony Blair with Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gadhaffi on the outskirts of Libya's capital city, Tripoli.

Both Washington and London draped themselves in the mantle of righteous indignation over Saddam Hussein's role in the killing of innocent civilians during his years in power, claiming that the Iraqi strongman's use of poison gas and other crimes branded him a terrorist and placed him beyond the pale of civilized society. Their recourse to the "mass murderer" line became all the more strident as the official pretext for the war—Iraq's alleged stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction—was exposed as a tissue of lies.

Yet little more than a year after US and British forces invaded Iraq and toppled the Hussein regime, the image of Blair shaking hands with Gadhaffi—until recently a fervent advocate of terror against the West and the self-confessed author of the most deadly terrorist attack ever to occur in Europe, the 1988 bombing of an American Pan Am jet over Lockerbie, Scotland—was beamed around the world. Gadhaffi, who had for decades been branded a rogue leader and pariah, was now to be seen as a force for peace and partner in the "war on terror."

Why was Saddam Hussein beyond redemption, while Gadhaffi could be welcomed back into the fold? (The supposed moral transformation of the Libyan leader shows that the pendulum of imperialist politics can swing both ways. Not only can a one-time ally of the "free world"—Saddam Hussein when he enjoyed the support of Washington in the 1980s—find himself transformed overnight into an international bogeyman, but an enemy of mankind like the old Gadhaffi can suddenly become a force for peace and progress.)

The case connecting Libya to terrorist acts is far more easily made than similar charges levelled against Saddam Hussein. Though there are still many unanswered questions, Libya has formally accepted responsibility for the Lockerbie bombing, which took 270 lives. It handed over two of its citizens for trial, of whom one was convicted, and has also agreed to pay compensation to the Lockerbie relatives.

While there are those who still question Libya's and Abdel Baset al-Megrahi's guilt, the British government certainly does not.

Gadhaffi in the past made repeated declarations of support for terrorist attacks on the Western powers, and he provided both political and financial backing for the Irish Republican Army when it was still engaged in armed conflict with Britain.

Libya only officially renounced terrorism last August, when it handed a letter to the United Nations Security Council accepting responsibility for Lockerbie. But this was enough for Gadhaffi to be granted a clean bill of health.

In contrast, repeated denials by Baghdad of any link with September 11, Al Qaeda or any other militant Islamic group fell on deaf ears, as Washington and London combined to insist on such connections in the absence of any evidence or convincing political rationale.

The same contrasting picture is apparent on the issue of weapons of mass destruction. Blair's visit took place just 15 weeks after Libya agreed to abandon its WMD programmes and surrendered a 20-tonne stockpile of mustard gas and nerve agent precursors. In contrast, Iraq was subject to 12 years of intensive weapons inspections, repeated military attacks and punitive sanctions that laid waste to the country. Even after all this, after far more extensive decommissioning had taken place with no evidence of WMDs remaining, the carpet bombing of Baghdad began.

No political concern was of sufficient magnitude to stop Blair from rushing to visit Gadhaffi. He knew that there would be the danger of adverse publicity, particularly since he flew to Tripoli after attending the Spanish state funeral for the 190 victims of the March 11 Madrid terror bombings. But rather than delay his flight, he sought to negate a possible backlash by sending his Middle East minister, Lady Symons, to secure the support of the UK Families of Flight 103 campaign group, and no less than Foreign Secretary Jack Straw to speak to the mother of police officer Yvonne Fletcher, who was allegedly shot dead by a Libyan diplomat outside Libya's London embassy in 1984.

Those families of British people killed on the orders of the Libyan regime who backed Blair's trip did so out of a genuine desire to lessen the threat from terrorism through dialogue with Tripoli, but that was far from the top of the list of Blair's own priorities.

After greeting Gadhaffi, Blair spoke of his hope for a "new relationship." This includes sharing intelligence information on Al Qaeda, but its more substantial fruits were made clear by the accompanying announcement that the Anglo-Dutch Shell oil

company had signed a deal worth up to £550 million (\$1 billion) for gas exploration rights off the Libyan coast.

Libya has over 30 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, worth upwards of £600 billion, and currently produces 1.4 million barrels daily. Western companies have been prevented from exploiting these resources by the sanctions imposed after Lockerbie, but all that is changing.

Blair's declaration that since he has renounced chemical weapons Gadhaffi is now a partner in the "war on terror" also means that Britain can start a lucrative arms trade with Libya.

This has already begun. British Aerospace (BAE), the UK's largest arms firm, is said to be in "advanced negotiations" for a major trade deal with Libya. Given that an arms embargo is still nominally in force against Libya, BAE has insisted that it is only discussing "civil aviation requirements" such as "airport infrastructure, air traffic management, safety and regulatory issues." But Blair made clear that such diplomatic considerations will soon be swept aside.

He has promised that to compensate Libya for renouncing chemical weapons, the Ministry of Defence will help Libya build a conventional army and air force. This would probably involve training Libyan cadets at the British Army's officer academy, Sandhurst, and dispatching military advisers to Tripoli. Gadhaffi was a Sandhurst pupil in 1967.

Blair hopes to seize the initiative for Britain in a massive programme of arms sales. A government official has confirmed to the *Scotsman* newspaper that Britain is pushing hard for an end to the arms embargo "in the next few months" and has started to help Libya with its "thinking" on military issues to "take decisions for their legitimate security needs in their changed circumstances."

The *Scotsman* notes wryly, "This, translated, means the Libyans will very soon need advice on which weapons to buy."

Oil and gas exploration and weapons sales are worth billions, but so too are the contracts that could be forthcoming for various infrastructure projects in the beleaguered country.

The final benefit for Blair in making his trip to Libya is political. Both London and Washington have utilised Gadhaffi's pledge to abandon its WMD programmes as proof that the "war on terror" is working—and that other countries fear being subject to the treatment meted out to Iraq and will either be forced to change their ways or face the same fate.

Blair's sense of urgency in consolidating diplomatic and trade relations with Tripoli is in large measure due to potential competition from Italy, Germany, France and others.

The United States is determined not to lag behind, despite being the main architect of Libya's 15 years of sanctions. Blair's visit to Tripoli was immediately preceded by a slightly less high profile trip by the US special envoy to the Middle East, William Burns.

The first high-ranking US official to visit Libya since the 1969 coup that brought Gadhaffi to power, Burns handed over a letter from President Bush that an official said dealt with

bilateral relations and the international situation. The US has already re-established a diplomatic presence in Tripoli after more than 20 years.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said the US and Libya were moving ahead with the political roadmap laid out after Libya agreed to abandon WMD programmes.

The US is planning to ease restrictions under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act to allow US citizens to spend money in Libya, thus enabling American oil companies to negotiate deals in advance of the formal lifting of US sanctions. US oil companies have not been able to work in Libya since 1986.

The attitude of American oil giants such as Occidental Petroleum and Exxon Mobil was summed up by Bruce Evers, an analyst at Investec Investment Banking, who told the *New York Times*, "Clearly this is going to put a lot of pressure on Bush to get in there and make things happen for the Americans. It is not every day that an OPEC member comes out and says, 'Come on down.'"

The diametrically opposed treatment of Iraq and Libya is not due to fundamental differences between the regimes of Saddam Hussein and Colonel Gadhaffi. Notwithstanding the invocations of humanitarian concern for the Iraqi people and other rhetoric associated with the so-called "war on terror," Iraq was conquered so that the US could establish its hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East. Libya is now being courted out of the same essential considerations. London may have stolen a march on its European rivals, but the Bush administration will demand the lion's share of Libyan oil contracts as payback for its billion-dollar investment in the Iraq war.



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