

Lockerbie: More evidence of cynical machinations behind Megrahi's release

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Fresh allegations were made at the weekend that the British government had sought a deal with Libya over Abdul Baset Ali al-Megrahi, the only person convicted for the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103.

The claims support the contention that Megrahi's release on August 20 had little to do with the "humanitarian" considerations routinely cited by its defenders, much less any concern for the victims of the Lockerbie bombings and their families. Rather, it is a particularly cynical and sordid episode in the ongoing efforts of British capitalism to secure its geopolitical and economic interests.

The *Sunday Times* cited leaked letters as proof that the government had reversed its previous decision to exclude Megrahi from a Prisoner Transfer Agreement (PTA) signed by Britain and Libya in 2007 (which enables prisoners to serve out their sentences in their home countries), with an eye to trade deals with the North African country.

The newspaper said that Justice Secretary Jack Straw had written to his Scottish counterpart Kenny MacAskill on December 19, 2007, stating that he had been unable to convince Libya that Megrahi should be specifically excluded from the PTA. Therefore, as "wider negotiations with the Libyans are reaching a critical stage and, in view of the overwhelming interests for the UK," he had dropped his demand.

Just six weeks later, the *Times* reported, Britain's oil giant BP secured a £15 billion oil and gas exploration deal in Libya.

Straw has said that debate over the terms of the PTA are "academic" as Megrahi was not released under the transfer agreement but on "compassionate" grounds due to his diagnosis with terminal prostate cancer—a decision taken by MacAskill alone and based solely on humanitarian provisions within Scottish law.

Even while London and Edinburgh engage in a damaging tit-for-tat release of correspondence relating to their discussions over Megrahi's fate, both continue to maintain this line. Their protestations are hardly credible.

While there is considerable scepticism about Megrahi's original conviction, the British government and the Scottish administration insist that he is guilty, making his release, just eight years into his sentence for the worst ever terrorist atrocity

in Britain, even more suspect.

The *Times* cited the comments of Saad Djebbar, an international lawyer who advises the Libyan government and who visited Megrahi in jail in Scotland: "No one was in any doubt that if al-Megrahi died in a Scottish prison it would have serious repercussions for many years which would be to the disadvantage of British industry."

MacAskill and the Scottish National Party claim that the Scottish and British governments are two distinct entities, motivated by differing interests and ethics—so that base considerations over trade could not have entered into their deliberations over Megrahi.

But Oliver Miles, Britain's former ambassador to Libya, has said he believes that "some kind of deal" was struck between the British and Scottish governments and Tripoli for the Libyan's release.

There was "something fishy" in Megrahi's decision to drop his appeal against conviction on the same day that news of his imminent release leaked out, Miles told the *Times*. "I cannot know what exactly happened but I believe that the UK and Scottish governments wanted the appeal to be dropped and somehow it was dropped," he said.

Separately, the *Daily Mail* cited a "leaked email" from a "whistleblower in the Scottish justice department," alleging that the need for Megrahi to drop his legal action was "rammed home" to Libya.

"A successful appeal would have been a humiliation for the US, UK and Scottish governments—meaning no one had been found responsible for the worst terrorist outrage in British history," the newspaper alleged.

Whatever the specific calculations, there appears to have been a confluence of interests in support of Megrahi's returning home.

Moreover, the decision cannot be considered in isolation from the preceding 20 years of Great Power duplicity surrounding the Lockerbie bombing, and relations with Libya in particular.

Almost from the moment Pan Am Flight 103 exploded above Scotland en route to New York City, the search for truth and for justice for those whose lives were destroyed has always been entirely subordinate to the political and commercial interests of the major powers.

Responsibility for the bombing was initially assigned to Iran, as a revenge attack by the latter for the shooting down of one of its civilian aircraft by the US military six months before, killing all 290 people on board. But Washington at this time was seeking to ensure Iranian acquiescence in its planned attack on Iraq in the first Gulf war.

Libya, which opposed the assault, was singled out, and in 1992 the US imposed economic sanctions, on the condition that the Libyans accept responsibility and hand over the two men alleged to be responsible, Megrahi and Lamin Khalifah Fhimah.

Over the next period, several events combined to make this seemingly impossible demand realisable. The collapse of the Soviet Union encouraged Colonel Muammar Gaddafi to drop his anti-imperialist rhetoric and search for an accommodation with the Western powers. European oil companies—specifically French and Italian interests—were keen to develop their own explorations in Libya, home to the sixth largest oil reserves in the world.

The coming to power of the Labour government in 1997 broke the log-jam. Anxious that British oil companies should not lose out to their European competitors, the Blair government brokered negotiations on the handover of the two accused Libyans, and in 1999 the US, Britain and Libya agreed terms for their trial in the Netherlands.

The judicial hearing was the backdrop for London and Washington's efforts to secure access to Libyan resources. Despite numerous outstanding questions, many doubts about the responsibility of either Libyan, and Fhimah's acquittal, Megrahi was convicted in 2000 by the non-jury court. Libya "accepted responsibility" for the actions of its agents and agreed to pay compensation in return for the lifting of sanctions.

Subsequently, Libya provided the US and the UK with intelligence information necessary to their warmongering in the Middle East in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks. Following the 2003 US-led pre-emptive war on Iraq in the face of massive international popular opposition, Libya announced that it would abandon its primitive nuclear weapons programme—bolstering Washington and London's claims that their "war on terror" strategy was working.

International sanctions were lifted, and in March 2004, barely one year after the invasion of Iraq, Blair was greeted warmly by Gaddafi on a high profile visit to Tripoli which saw the Anglo-Dutch Shell oil company sign a potential £550 million deal for gas exploration rights, amongst other trade deals.

Notwithstanding the denunciations of Megrahi's release by US politicians over the last weeks, the Bush administration was deeply involved in these manoeuvres.

Blair was followed to Tripoli by William Burns, the US assistant secretary of state and special envoy to the Middle East, who became the first high-ranking American official to visit the country since the 1969 coup. A letter he delivered from

Bush was said to include "bilateral relations," no doubt a coded reference to the demands from US companies for access to oil and other strategic resources such as gas.

Another visit by Blair in May 2007 saw numerous energy and defence deals agreed, including a \$2 billion gas exploration project for BP. In 2008, the US government hosted a reception at the State Department for the Libyan foreign minister, Abdelrahman Shalgam. In September of that year, Condoleezza Rice became the first US secretary of state to visit Libya in 55 years. In November, Britain and Libya signed the PTA.

According to reports, in the first five months of 2009, UK exports to Libya rose by 48 percent compared to the same period in the previous year, to £165.4 million, and UK imports from Libya—particularly oil—by 48.5 percent to £966 million.

The UK is not alone. Libya's proven oil reserves amount to approximately three percent of the global total, but much remains unexplored. This has become a source of fierce competition between the major powers, not least among the European states who are seeking to reduce their reliance on Russia for energy supplies.

In the last few years, Italy agreed a \$5 billion compensation package with Tripoli. Supposedly as reparation for its years of colonial rule, this was to be targeted on "infrastructure projects" with Italian firms the significant beneficiaries. In December 2007 French President Nicolas Sarkozy met with Gaddafi and agreed deals worth \$14.7 billion for armaments and the development of a nuclear reactor.

Russia is extremely active. Just last year, President Vladimir Putin announced Libya's \$4.6 billion debt with Russia was to be written off in exchange for major bilateral trade deals, including a gas exploration deal with Gazprom. Last month, as Tripoli and Moscow signed a civil nuclear cooperation pact, Russian oil firm Tatneft announced it had "successfully drilled a well on an oil block of Libya's Ghadames Basin, some 345 kilometres (214 miles) south of Tripoli."

Writing in the *Guardian* September 2, former ambassador Miles decried calls for further information on Britain's relations with Libya that made sense only "to someone who thinks that the British government should stop supporting British trade (something it has been doing since the time of King Henry VIII's ambassador to Ivan the Terrible), and leave the field clear for the Italians, the French, the Americans, the Russians and so on. Who really thinks that is a good idea?"



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