

Convicted of Lockerbie bombing, al Megrahi dies protesting innocence

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Abdelbaset Ali Mohamed al Megrahi has died in Tripoli. He was the sole person convicted of the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. His co-accused, Llamen Fhimah, was acquitted at their 2001 trial.

The Lockerbie atrocity was the single most notorious act of international terrorism officially associated with the regime of late Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Two hundred seventy people, mostly US citizens, lost their lives.

Megrahi was released in 2009 following an intervention by Scottish justice secretary Kenny MacAskill. Terminally ill, he was offered release on compassionate grounds with the tacit understanding that a long-delayed appeal against his conviction be dropped. His release served to further smooth the increasingly close relations established between the British and Libyan governments in the aftermath of his conviction. Megrahi's freedom was reported to be bound up with major contracts for British oil company BP for the exploitation of Libya's huge oil reserves.

At the time, the US government made a show of protest over Megrahi's release. And in the days immediately after the conclusion of the NATO-backed war of 2011 that overthrew Gaddafi's government, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton promised US relatives of those killed on the plane that she would demand Megrahi's return to jail, in either the US or Scotland. In response, Mohammed al-Alagi, interim justice minister for the National Transitional Council (NTC), told journalists in Tripoli that the request had "no meaning" because Megrahi had already been tried and convicted.

Given the character of the NTC and its installation by Washington, an act of defiance is the least credible explanation for such behaviour. More likely, the message regarding Lockerbie was drafted with the approval of the CIA and Washington. Its message could not be clearer. Let sleeping dogs lie.

A feature of the NATO war and its aftermath was the repeated targeting of Gaddafi and with his immediate family and entourage for assassination to ensure their post-war silence. Gaddafi himself was murdered immediately after the fall of Sirte. His sons Saif al-Arab and Khassim were killed during the war, Mutassim was slaughtered shortly after his father, while the rest of the fallen dictator's family have been scattered around Africa. Saif al-Islam remains incarcerated by the CIA-backed Zintan militia in unknown circumstances.

Shukri Ghanem was a former prime minister and head of the

Libyan National Oil Corporation. He was central to the deals struck to reopen exploitation of Libyan oil resources following Megrahi's trial at Camp Zeist, in the Netherlands.

Ghanem caused a furore in 2004 when he stated that Libya was not responsible for the Lockerbie attack, but that Libya "bought peace" by accepting responsibility and paying compensation to the victims' relatives. He defected in the early stages of the 2011 war and was reported to be setting up an oil consultancy with former oil ministers from Algeria and Iraq. Ghanem was recently found dead in the river Danube.

Ghanem's successor as Libyan prime minister was Al Baghdadi Ali al-Mahmoud, who recently caused a furore when he informed French media organisation Mediapart that former President Nicolas Sarkozy's 2007 election campaign was funded from Libya to the tune of €50 million. He produced a letter purportedly from Gaddafi's former intelligence chief, Moussa Koussa, to authenticate the claim. Cash was supposedly transferred via a Libyan African Portfolio fund. Sarkozy threatened to sue, while Koussa denounced the document as a fake.

Mahmoud is currently in jail in Tunisia, pending a decision to extradite him back to Libya.

Moussa Koussa's circumstances seem, for the moment, more secure. At the time of the Lockerbie attack, Koussa was a leading member of Gaddafi's external security organisation, the Mathaba. He then headed the Mukhabarat el-Jamahiriya or JSO, Libyan intelligence, for 15 years. In 2009, he took over the role of foreign minister. No individual is better acquainted with the secret workings of the Gaddafi regime, particularly its dealings with the major powers, their intelligence services and oil companies. He was undoubtedly the architect of Libyan involvement in the US and UK governments' extraordinary rendition and torture of those they identified as "enemy combatants."

His defection to the UK in March 2011 was a major blow to the Gaddafi government. The *Sunday Express* of April 3, 2011, reported that Koussa had been working with the British MI6 since 2001. Other commentary at the time noted that Koussa assisted the uprising in Eastern Libya that ultimately led to the collapse of the Gaddafi government.

In September 2011, the *Guardian* reported after Koussa's Tripoli office was captured, "Four decades of Gaddafi secrets sit on shelves in ring binders, along with at least a decade's worth of Libya's dealings with Europe and the US. With the treasure trove guarded only by two sleepy 18-year-olds with Kalashnikovs, it

may make for some restless days ahead for Europe's spy services."

If anyone knows the truth of Libyan involvement in Lockerbie, it will be Koussa. Yet, following a brief unreported conversation with Scottish prosecutors, he was allowed to go free. He is currently reported to be living in Qatar, a US ally.

Publicly, the British and American governments are maintaining their charade of "seeking the truth" over the Lockerbie case. The director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Robert Mueller, and Scotland's lord advocate, Frank Mulholland, recently made a trip to Libya.

Mueller, who has been involved in the Lockerbie case from the beginning, and Mulholland met with Libyan prime minister Abdurrahim el-Keib. The meeting reportedly cleared the way for members of the Dumfries and Galloway police force, which covers Lockerbie, to travel to Libya.

No evidence emerging from such sources will have the slightest credibility.

By contrast, dogged efforts by Megrahi's defence team and a growing number of human rights commentators have assembled a body of knowledge that further undermines the official case on which Megrahi was convicted. It makes clear that, on the available evidence, Megrahi was framed.

Earlier this year, journalist John Ashton, who has studied the Lockerbie attack for nearly two decades, published *Megrahi: You Are My Jury—The Lockerbie Evidence*. He works with Megrahi's defence team, and the book is a summary of the team's findings.

Of particular significance is evidence regarding the origins and composition of the circuit board fragment PT/35B, officially alleged to have triggered the explosion. According to Ashton, the composition of the circuit board wiring means that it could not have been part of a batch sold to Zurich electronics firm MeBo. The fragment was therefore not part of a timer made by MeBo. This breaks the evidential and circumstantial chain on which Megrahi was convicted, as it depends on Megrahi's business dealings with MeBo's dubious boss, Edmund Bollier.

Ashton also recounts new surveys of the likely impact of the blast, undermining the official line that located the bomb in a particular suitcase, containing clothes from Malta. He reviews the evidence pointing to Heathrow as the most likely insertion point for the bomb. Earlier this year, it was reported that Megrahi's defence team was not informed of a Heathrow break-in until after the 2001 trial. Police interviews were carried out in 1989.

The book describes reward money offered to Maltese shopkeepers Paul and Tony Gauci by the US Department of Justice and recounts the prompted character of Tony Gauci's visual identification of Megrahi. Ashton notes numerous alarming documentary and forensic discrepancies, in addition to those surrounding PT/35B itself.

Item PF/546, for example, was found on December 25, 1988, east of Lockerbie, by two local police. Their notes describe the item as a "piece of yellow wire soldered to +ve of a Duracell 1.5V battery" and as "an American battery".

The significance of this item rests on its similarity to bombs in circulation at the time designed by Jordanian agent Marween Khreesat. This piece of evidence was delivered to a storage

warehouse in Longtown, near Lockerbie, on February 8, 1989. It has never been seen since. Other significant items are recorded as having been destroyed by the police in 1990.

Equally disturbing are objects PK/1992 and PE/354. PK/1992, apparently intact, was described as a green box with "warning military explosive" printed on the side along with a stock number. A further note records this object as "Activation charge for USAF chaff distribution." PE/354 was recorded as "various pieces of charred material & paper marked 'military explosive'." The question arises: Why were US munitions being transported on a civilian airliner?

A number of "no-go" areas were established at the crash site in which normal evidence gathering rules were ignored. One appeared to surround an object described by a local helicopter pilot as covered in a red tarpaulin, somewhat smaller than a car. The object was taken away by truck. Large amounts of cash and drugs were found, which were also removed by US officials.

Ashton recounts a February 1990 meeting between Martin Cadman, whose son was killed on PA103, and members of a US Presidential Commission on aviation security at the US Embassy in London. At the end of the meeting, one of the seven commissioners took Cadman aside and told him, "Your government and ours know exactly what happened, but they are never going to tell."

He includes a number of extensive interviews with Megrahi, made in Libya after his 2009 release.

Megrahi presented himself as a businessman with interests in a number of harmless trading activities who had worked as a flight dispatcher for Libyan airlines. He also had a role in the JSO, but stated that this was restricted to organising a news monitoring service. Megrahi always insisted on his innocence. He explains that legal advice prevented him either taking the stand at Camp Zeist or defending himself during the appeal, something he later regretted.



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