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## Monitoring Study:

# British Media Portrayals of Gaddafi & Libya

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## Introduction

A huge amount of media coverage has been generated by the recent release on compassionate grounds by the Scottish government of Libyan Abdel Baset al-Megrahi, convicted of the Lockerbie bombing. Very strong opinions have emerged over the whole affair.

A common refrain in the media is that al-Megrahi showed his victims no compassion, so why should he be shown some? Many see the release as giving in to terrorism and an injustice to the victims' families, and considerable sympathy with America's point of view - and outrage - is evident. A great deal of coverage focuses on the British government and whether it put pressure on the Scottish government to release al-Megrahi in return for business contracts with Libya.

This analysis will focus on comment on Colonel Gaddafi and Libya itself, rather than the arguments used to debate the release of al-Megrahi. In fact, the narrative used to describe the country and its leadership has changed little over the years.

## Summary

- There is plenty to be said about Colonel Gaddafi and Libya in recent media coverage. However, it draws on previously held ideas and themes.
- There are a number of brief, mainly disparaging descriptions of Gaddafi and Libya.
- A link with terrorism is never far away in descriptions of Gaddafi.
- Gaddafi is an unpopular figure at home, according to some.
- Some commentators look to the future, and question what comes after Gaddafi.
- Gaddafi's son Saif al-Islam is most frequently mentioned in the context of Libya's future.
- A common theme in recent coverage has been describing Gaddafi and Libya as coming in from the cold, which in fact has been a familiar theme for a number of years. A lot of comment to this effect mentions the same basic points.
- There are clear opinions on Libya's rehabilitation.
- On the odd occasion, the potential of tourism is mentioned.
- Many commentators note what is characterised as increasingly close British-Libyan relations, and many sound a note of alarm.
- In addition to Lockerbie and the killing of WPC Yvonne Fletcher, various writers frequently list a number of other things on the Libyan charge sheet.
- A lot has been made in recent coverage of the suspected exchange of Libyan Abdel Baset al-Megrahi, convicted in a Scottish court of the Lockerbie bombing, in return for lucrative business contracts with Libya. A few commentators look further into that issue, which for the most part is identified as 'oil.'
- Some commentators say the growing relationship between Britain and Libya is nothing new.

## ملخص

- قيل وكتب الكثير عن العقيد القذافي وليبيا في التغطية الاعلامية مؤخرا، إلا أنها اعتمدت على افكار وانطباعات مسبقة.
- هناك عدد من الأوصاف المختصرة التي غالباً ما تنتقص من قدر القذافي وليبيا.
- الصلة بالارهاب لا تستبعد لدى وصف القذافي.
- القذافي شخصية لا تحظى بشعبية في الداخل، حسب رأي البعض.
- بعض المعلقين ينظرون للمستقبل ويتساءلون ماذا بعد القذافي؟
- ابن القذافي سيف الاسلام هو الاسم الاكثر ترددا عند الحديث عن مستقبل ليبيا.
- الفكرة الرئيسية المشتركة في التغطية الاعلامية مؤخرا كانت وصف القذافي وليبيا بالخارجين من العزلة، وهو ما كان في الواقع الوصف الملازم لهما لعدة سنوات. كما وجاءت عدة تعليقات بهذا الخصوص ضمن هذا المحور.
- هناك آراء واضحة حول اعادة تأهيل ليبيا.
- تتم الاشارة الى الامكانات السياحية في حالات استثنائية فقط.
- استرعى ما وُصف بعلاقات وثيقة متزايدة بين بريطانيا وليبيا انتباه الكثيرين من المعلقين، وأطلق كثيرون اصوات تحذير بهذا الخصوص.
- بالاضافة الى قضية لوكربي ومقتل الشرطة البريطانية "إيفون فليشر"، يقوم كتاب عدة بإدراج قضايا أخرى على لائحة اتهامات ليبيا على نحو متكرر.
- كثر اللغط في التغطية الاعلامية مؤخرا حول الاشتباه بمقايسة الليبي عبد الباسط المقرحي، الذي أدانته محكمة اسكتلندية في قضية تفجير لوكربي، نظير عقود تجارية مربحة مع ليبيا. قلة من المعلقين تعمقوا في هذا الموضوع ورجّحوا أن يكون الدافع هو: "النفط".
- يقول بعض المعلقين أن العلاقات المتنامية بين بريطانيا وليبيا ليست بالأمر الجديد.

## Descriptions of Gaddafi & Libya

There is plenty to be said about Colonel Gaddafi and Libya in the recent media coverage. However, it draws on previously held ideas and themes.

### **Colonel Muammar Gaddafi**

There are a number of brief, pithy descriptions of Gaddafi:

"A tin-pot - but rich - dictator" (Ruth Dudley-Edward, columnist, Daily Mail, 21 August)

"Survivor of Survivors" (Damien McElroy, foreign affairs correspondent, Daily Telegraph, 1 September)

"The 'Mad Dog' of the desert who so provoked Ronald Reagan" (McElroy, 1 September)

"In every way the true godfather of terror... a bizarre cross between Michael Jackson and Phil Spector" (Michael Burleigh, Mail, 14 August)

"Like a bad Michael Jackson running a country-sized Neverland with added (but not simulated) torture" (David Aaronovitch, columnist, Times, 25 August)

"Gaddafi is addicted to mischief" (Trevor Kavanagh, associate editor, Sun, 24 August)

"Despite his Bedouin tents and protestations of modesty, he enjoys being gauche" (Daniel Howden, Africa correspondent, Independent, 3 September)

"A man who has gone on the record as hating all things western" (Brian Flynn, brother of a Lockerbie victim, Guardian, 21 August)

"Highly unpredictable" (Martin Fletcher, associate editor, Times, 26 August)

"Gaddafi... is as famous for his unpredictability as for his flamboyant clothes and rambling addresses" (Ian Black, Middle East editor, Guardian, 2 September)

"Without doubt a repellent figure" (Editorial, Independent, 14 August)

"Not enough wars have been fought on the planet to justify his barrage of medals" (Jan Moir, columnist, Mail, 4 September)

Gaddafi "does not play by the normal rules of diplomacy," and "the only certainty when dealing with Gaddafi is that nothing is certain," writes Independent deputy editor Ian Birrell (26 August).

A link with terrorism is never far away in descriptions of Gaddafi:

"In the past, he has been a supporter of terrorists" (Peter McKay, columnist, Mail, 24 August)

"Mad Dog Gaddafi...armed IRA killers and put assassins on London's streets" (Trevor Kavanagh, Sun, 24 August)

Independent columnist Dominic Lawson writes that "if anyone can be accused of being the malevolent power behind the slaughter of so many innocents heading home for Christmas with their families, that man is Muammar Abu Minyar al-Gaddafi" (25 August).

Gaddafi "has travelled some way since he was branded the 'mad dog' that Ronald Reagan tried to kill," according to a Guardian editorial (14 August).

## **Libya**

A number of pithy descriptions of Libya are worth mentioning.

"A state that sponsored terrorism across the globe" (Michael Burleigh, Daily Mail, 14 August)

"At the height of its notoriety as a terrorist state, Libya was part of a prototype 'Axis of Evil' alongside Syria and Iran" (Damien McElroy, foreign affairs correspondent, Daily Telegraph, 1 September)

"Libya is no democracy, but it is, at least, no longer sponsoring terrorism abroad, nor seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction...must be kept strictly at arms length" (Editorial, Independent, 3 September)

"A harsh regime where torture is routine" (Trevor Kavanagh, associate editor, Sun, 24 August)

"A repressive police state ruled by a ruthless egomaniac" (Martin Fletcher, associate editor, Times, 26 August)

"One of the most intolerant and arbitrary in the world" (Jeremy Seabrook, Guardian, 14 August)

Seabrook explains the accusations of repression a bit further (14 August):

"Law 71 of the Penal Code of 1972 is a piece of draconian legislation, which criminalises political parties and prohibits dissent."

Gaddafi is an unpopular figure at home, according to some. He is "rightly blamed by many Libyans for the stagnation of the country despite its massive oil wealth," writes Independent deputy editor Ian Birrell (26 August), adding:

"In Libya...the infrastructure is crumbling, poverty is endemic, power cuts a way of life. Educational standards are poor, wages low and unemployment, especially among the young, is high. All this in a country where, although the population has grown fast, there are still only 6 million people sitting on huge reserves of some of the world's best crude oil."

Ordinary Libyans are "infuriated by their impoverishment," writes Birrell. The security services have seen to it that "the military has been purged, Islamic fundamentalists crushed, opponents executed and rivals played off against each other."

Fletcher also acknowledges the ordinary Libyan perspective (24 August):

"In Libya al-Megrahi is considered a victim, not a terrorist...Moreover most Libyans regard his release as a national victory, a measure of their country's rising stature in a world desperate for its oil and gas."

## Future of Libya

Some commentators look to the future, and question what comes after Gaddafi. Independent deputy editor Ian Birrell notes an impending clash between the Libyan old guard and "a younger generation [who] want reform" (26 August). Adding to the "combustible legacy" are "tribal divisions...and Arab nationalism."

There is a "discreet power struggle" underway between Colonel Gaddafi's fourth son, Moatessem-Billah, the head of Libyan intelligence, and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, "the wild card" and "international gadfly turned dealmaker," writes Daily Telegraph foreign affairs correspondent Damien McElroy (1 September).

Saif al-Islam is most frequently mentioned in the context of Libya's future. Birrell views him as "the voice of reconciliation."

Times diplomatic correspondent Catherine Philp notes that Saif (Gaddafi's "Westernised son and heir") is "far keener on inheriting a Western-leaning oil power than a pariah desert state" (21 August).

To Richard Pendlebury in the Daily Mail, "the urbane Saif, an artist and graduate of the London School of Economics...has made the right noises about democracy" (24 August), adding that he "appears to be the regime's more palatable future."

## Coming in from the Cold

A common theme in the recent coverage has been describing Gaddafi and Libya as coming in from the cold, which in fact has been a familiar theme for a number of years. A lot of comment to this effect mentions the same basic points.

Gaddafi's 'rehabilitation' was facilitated by "renouncing his bad old ways as a global revolutionary and abandoning his quest to build weapons of mass destruction," writes Independent deputy editor Ian Birrell, adding that "it suits us, because we need friends in the region and, of course, access to those vast oil reserves" (26 August).

Independent foreign editor Katherine Butler agrees, writing that "since then, Western leaders and oil companies like BP have beaten a path to his tent, lured by the promise of supplies to reduce reliance on Russia" (21 August). In return, "rehabilitation means the promise of much-needed investment."

This rehabilitation ended a period of being "locked in confrontation" with the West, writes Simon Tisdall, assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist at the Guardian (14 August).

Some, such as Malcolm Rifkind (Guardian, 3 September), feel the process is complete:

"Muammar Gaddafi had already come in from the cold, and ceased his objectionable behaviour; and he had been rewarded for so doing."

However, a Times editorial (1 September) disagrees:

"Libya's rehabilitation is welcome, but the process has barely begun. To cease supporting terrorism and building nuclear weapons is not the finish line, but the starting point for building meaningful relations with the rest of the world."

Times diplomatic correspondent Catherine Philp suggested that Gaddafi was amenable because he had "seen his attempts at reinventing himself as a pan-Arabist then a pan-African hero fall on stony ground, and watched the US bulldoze its way to Saddam's Baghdad with barely a peep from its old ally, Russia. Isolation suited neither his ego nor his national purse; he might as well rethink" (25 August).

Gaddafi in 2003 was fearful "that the fate of Saddam might also become his own," writes Jeremy Seabrook in the Guardian (14 August). For complying, Gaddafi was "spectacularly rewarded."

Philp notes Gaddafi's compliance (21 August):

"Colonel Gaddafi has done almost everything the West has asked of him since he began his rehabilitation in 2003."

A Daily Telegraph editorial notes another dimension to the rehabilitation (14 August):

"Libya...is strategically important in the fight against Islamists."

But John Kampfner in the Daily Mail (15 August) notes with some irony:

"Suddenly, we forgot about his record in fomenting terrorism and his continued abuses of human rights."

However, John Bolton in the Telegraph thinks that releasing al-Megrahi - "one more act of Western appeasement" - will make Gaddafi "wonder again why, five years ago, he gave up his nuclear and chemical weapons programmes" (24 August).

Times associate editor Martin Fletcher suggests that rehabilitation is complete, writing that the Libyan celebrations to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Gaddafi's reign will also mark the country's "final break with its dark, terrorist-sponsoring, WMD-building, West-baiting past" (24 August).

A Times editorial is one of a few pieces that notes Gaddafi's imminent address to the UN in New York as further proof (21 August).

There are also clear opinions on Libya's rehabilitation, which an Independent editorial describes as "distasteful" (14 August). It is "a murky story of oil, guns, terror and backroom trading," writes Michael Burleigh in the Mail (14 August).

## Tourism

On the odd occasion, tourism is mentioned. For Libya, "rehabilitation means...one day, even tourism," writes Independent foreign editor Katherine Butler (21 August).

Others think that tourism - or at least its great potential - is already there. Michael Burleigh in the Daily Mail notes (14 August):

"Gaddafi is...keen to capture a share of the tourism market since the Libyan coast is littered with fine examples of Roman ruins, amidst which luxury resorts and villas are developing."

Independent deputy editor Ian Birrell writes (26 August):

"Amid the fading grandeur of Tripoli sits one of the world's best museums, offering a glimpse into Libya's astonishing heritage."

## Libya & Britain

Many commentators note what is characterised as increasingly close British-Libyan relations, and many sound a note of alarm. "Britain has led the way in welcoming Gaddafi back into the international fold, anticipating huge dividends," writes Independent deputy editor Ian Birrell, warning that "we should be wary of hugging him too close" (26 August).

Others, such as Sun deputy editor and columnist Fergus Shanahan (25 August), are in no doubt that such a relationship is wrong:

"Sickening, isn't it, considering that Libya killed 270 people in the Lockerbie bombing, to say nothing of murdering London policewoman Yvonne Fletcher."

In addition to Lockerbie and the killing of WPC Yvonne Fletcher, various writers frequently list a number of other things on the Libyan charge sheet: "A long history of sponsoring international terrorism [and] a series of atrocities and political assassination on British soil" (Richard Pendlebury, Daily Mail, 21 August). The assassinations are said to refer to Libyan dissidents killed in Britain by Libyan agents.

Although there are many like Shanahan, not all follow his logic. The al-Megrahi case is "a classic example of our interests colliding with our values - and national interest coming out on top," writes Daily Telegraph diplomatic editor David Blair (21 August). "There is nothing dishonourable about a country deciding where its crucial interest lies and acting accordingly."

Blair suggests why:

"Libya, under the newly pragmatic rule of Col Muammar Gaddafi, has become an important ally, ideally placed to help us combat terrorism and nuclear proliferation - the two biggest threats to British national security. So keeping Libya happy matters a great deal, particularly as the country also possesses 42 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and a similar abundance of natural gas."

However, this is not to suggest that everything is comfortable, according to Simon Tisdall, assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist at the Guardian (14 August), among others. Noting the Libyan crime sheet, he says the issue of Yvonne Fletcher is still unresolved, and that "serious differences" remain over "Gaddafi's eclectic, undemocratic, style of governance, and Libya's human rights record."

Of this relationship, Tony Blair is frequently identified as responsible. A meeting between him and Gaddafi is described by Michael Burleigh in the Mail as "like two grotesque and ageing rock stars bidding each other their adieus" (14 August). Unsurprisingly, Burleigh is critical of the whole thing:

"It is utterly distasteful that Britain is cosyng up to one of the most murderous, deranged and unpredictable despots on the planet."

## Business Potential

A lot has been made in the recent coverage of the suspected exchange of Abdel Baset al-Megrahi in return for lucrative business contracts with Libya. A few commentators look further into that issue, which for the most part is identified as 'oil.'

Some commentators say the growing relationship between Britain and Libya is nothing new. Simon Tisdall, assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist at the Guardian, writes (14 August):

"A key driving force behind this steady rapprochement is growing British business interest in Libya."

Some, such as Guardian business reporter Elena Moya (25 August), wonder whether this is what is "dictating the pace of diplomatic detente."

Times diplomatic correspondent Catherine Philp also sees the potential of Libya's natural resources, describing the two powerful weapons in the country's arsenal: "its vast and barely tapped reserves of oil and gas" (25 August). That the reserves are relatively unexploited is noted by other commentators as an added attraction.

This represents for Britain "a real commercial interest in a better relationship with Libya," according to an Evening Standard editorial, noting that BP already has interests there (21 August).

Moya notes (August 25):

"Libya is estimated to be the most oil-rich country in Africa, with around 44bn barrels of reserves, and companies such as BP and Shell have been investing heavily there since 2004."

Independent Africa correspondent Daniel Howden agrees, but points towards plentiful natural gas (3 September):

"Libya...is rated by many of the oil majors as the single biggest exploitation opportunity in the world. But even this may be dwarfed by the natural gas reserves thought to be lying with the oil under the surface."

Times energy and environment editor Robin Pagnamenta echoes this, pointing out the scale of potential resources (14 August):

"At 42 billion barrels, Libya has the largest proven oil reserves of any African country - equal to about 3 per cent of the global total. Its gas reserves are some 1.5 trillion cubic metres, the fourth-largest in Africa."

In fact, writes Tisdall (14 August):

"BP has invested roughly \$1bn in oil and gas exploration there while other oil majors and EU governments, notably France, are also in on the act. Britain is already supplying missiles and air defence systems to Tripoli under a 2007 agreement."

Guardian financial correspondent Ian Griffiths agrees, writing (19 August):

"Libyan gas could help fill the UK's long term gas shortfall and simultaneously make Britain less reliant on Russian gas supplies."

Moya notes Libyan investment in the London property market (25 August).

Griffiths also notes a similar attraction for Libya:

"Energy is...crucial to the Libyan economy."

Pagnamenta echoes this, noting the urgency provided by weak oil prices (14 August).

Times chief foreign commentator Bronwen Maddox also reports the impact of oil prices, but in the worldwide perspective (14 August):

"In a global recession, where the price of oil is stuck at \$70 a barrel, no country or oil company can be indifferent to Libya's vast untapped reserves."