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for objective British coverage of Arab issues

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## Monitoring Study:

### British Media Portrayals of Gaddafi in Italy

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## Introduction

While not interested in his travels anywhere outside of Europe, the British press demonstrated considerable interest in the visit of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi to Italy in June 2009, as was the case when he visited France in 2007.

Arab Media Watch collated and analysed press coverage of the visit, and found that along with previous examinations of Gaddafi and Libya in the British media, there is little positive to be said.

Newspapers that covered his visit are the Mail on Sunday, Sunday Telegraph, Daily Express, Daily Mail, Guardian, Independent and Times.

## Descriptions

Commentators were forthcoming in their descriptions of Muammar Gaddafi. Only David Robson in the Daily Express (13 June 2009) was vaguely positive:

"It's permissible nowadays to have a certain admiration for Colonel Gadaffi of Libya. For decades reviled as one of the world's most dangerous nutters, he is now one of the good guys"

All others had strong opinions on him, as the following list demonstrates.

Suzanne Moore in the Mail on Sunday (14 June 2009):

"...an amoral clown [whose] flamboyance masks intolerable corruption."

William Langley in the Sunday Telegraph (14 June 2009):

"Everyone's favourite recovering revolutionary...the Michael Jackson of Third World despotism... a man from nowhere, paranoid and unstable."

Mark Almond in the Daily Mail (12 June 2009):

"Gaddafi is one of the maddest dictators on Earth...monstrous leader...No 1 state sponsor of terrorism against the West."

Zoe Williams in the Guardian (11 June 2009):

"...expeller of Libyan Italians, aggressive-wearer of sandals, unelected thug, deployer of hit squads, scourge of civil rights..."

## Appearance

As Muammar Gaddafi arrived in Italy, greeted by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, it was the Libyan leader's appearance that interested a number of commentators. None admired his look.

Suzanne Moore in the Mail on Sunday (14 June 2009) asked:

"...who could look at those pictures of Colonel Gaddafi with that other amoral clown Berlusconi and not laugh? These men are in charge of actual countries?...The lunatics have taken over the asylum, so I really think they may as well dress the part."

William Langley in the Sunday Telegraph (14 June 2009) felt he was "dressed like a set of spare curtains from La Scala," while sporting "a suspiciously dark and luxuriant tangle of rock star hair."

David Robson in the Daily Express (13 June 2009) suggested he looks "more like a comedy colonel." However, he added: "But why not? When in Rome do as the Romans do."

To Peter Popham in the Independent (12 June 2009), Gaddafi was "done up like a Savoy doorman."

Mark Almond in the Daily Mail (12 June 2009) felt the whole spectacle of arrival was odd:

"Rome has had its fair share of triumphant parades by bizarre tyrants in its long history. And the ageing Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's arrival on Monday ranked alongside any grotesque ceremony staged by Caligula or Nero."

Of Gaddafi, he observed:

"With gelled and carefully dyed hair, the Colonel was made up to look like a cross between Michael Jackson and the deranged music mogul murderer Phil Spector."

He added that "an array of military decorations...resembled a Dulux colour chart," an observation made in the same paper the day previously.

## Omar al-Mukhtar

As he arrived in Italy, Muammar Gaddafi wore a photograph of Omar al-Mukhtar, a Libyan national hero from its colonial period, pinned to his chest. This also attracted comment.

Al-Mukhtar was described variously as "a Libyan resistance fighter" (William Langley, Sunday Telegraph, 14 June 2009), a "freedom fighter" (Peter Popham, Independent, 12 June 2009), and the "Lion of the Desert" (John Hooper, Guardian, 11 June 2009).

The Daily Mail Foreign Service (11 June 2009) described the photograph:

"It showed Libyan national hero Omar al-Mukhtar, who was executed for leading a guerrilla war against the Italians in the 1920s and 1930s during their occupation of the north African country."

William Langley in the Sunday Telegraph (14 June 2009) erroneously described the photo as depicting al-Mukhtar "being hung by the Italians," when in fact it depicted a group of figures arresting him.

Mark Almond in the Mail (12 June 2009) also made this mistake.

Richard Owen in the Times (12 June 2009) reported protesters with their own "loaded political message" when they demonstrated "with pictures of wreckage from the Lockerbie bombing pinned to their chests."

## The Future

Some contrasting opinions are offered over Muammar Gaddafi's and Libya's future.

Mark Almond in the Daily Mail (12 June 2009) is certain:

"Anyone thinking that Colonel Gaddafi is becoming a cosy ally should think again...Gaddafi remains mercurial, menacing and murderous...Mellow with age he won't."

William Langley in the Sunday Telegraph (14 June 2009) is certain of the opposite:

"Brand Gaddafi has lost its menace, and what is left looks ever more like desperation...Pariah status is tolerable, even enjoyable, when you are young and idealistic. But 40 years of power have mellowed even Gaddafi. The attractions of blowing up innocent people fade and now he is looking to his legacy."

Langley concluded that Gaddafi is:

"Older, wiser, but not so crazy as to give the impression that he might be going sane."

## Mutual Gain

A number of commentators remarked on the purpose of Muammar Gaddafi's trip to Italy. A few comments were made in the general context of his 'coming in from the cold,' which is a familiar refrain in the media regarding Libya in recent years.

Richard Owen in the Times (11 June 2009) suggested that the trip was "meant to mark his final emergence from international pariah status," while Suzanne Moore in the Mail on Sunday (14 June 2009) suggested that "Gaddafi has been brought and bought in from the cold."

In an odd phrase, Mark Almond in the Daily Mail (12 June 2009) wrote that "in 2004, Tony Blair lifted the West's fatwa on him for sponsoring outrages." Almond added that "it is his loathing of Muslim fundamentalists that has brought him into alliance with the West."

However, most other commentators focused on the immediate purposes of the trip for both Libya and Italy. William Langley in the Sunday Telegraph (14 June 2009) wrote that it boils down to "making money". He continued:

"Libya has been clobbered by falling oil prices, and the after-effects of his reforms and Western sanctions have left it with virtually no other industries and a wrecked agricultural sector."

Langley wrote that what a £3 billion "reparations" payment to Libya agreed by Italy in 2008 is "really paying for is the Colonel's co-operation."

Michael Day in the Independent (10 June 2009) suggested that the payment was accompanied by "profuse apologies for colonial-era abuses." Peter Popham in the same newspaper (12 June 2009) wrote that "the deal promises well for both countries."

For Italy, the quid pro quo is "to stop the flow of illegal, mostly sub-Saharan immigrants who have made Libya a point of embarkation for the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa," wrote Langley, while Popham reported that Libya will get "a world-class autostrada from one end of the country to the other."

Popham was very critical of the deal on immigrants, which also involves the Italian right for its navy to patrol Libyan waters, about which he says Gaddafi and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi "have conspired to brush Italy's biggest immigration problem under a Libyan carpet." He continued: "The views of both men can be summarised succinctly: who cares what happens to these blacks?"

Almond (12 June 2009) noted that Italy lacks any energy resources of its own, "which is why Silvio Berlusconi has been more than happy to deal with Gaddafi." Libya's "ace card" is "Gaddafi's untold billions of energy reserves in the Libyan desert" that has "not been exploited nearly as much as other Mid-East states."

## Women

The subject of women was common in coverage of Muammar Gaddafi's visit to Italy, and there was no shortage of commentators to point out that both he and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi had a soft spot for beautiful women.

However, as usual, comments were critical, with several interested in Gaddafi's all-female unit of bodyguards - "girls who wear Kalashnikovs like Gucci fashion accessories," and who "don't hide their charms under a burqa," according to Mark Almond in the Daily Mail (12 June 2009).

Eliza Apperly in the Guardian (13 June 2009) wrote that Gaddafi "came as the self-styled 'emancipator of women', the world's longest-serving leader who makes much of his all-female bodyguard squad and favourable views towards the opposite sex."

Richard Owen in the Times (13 June 2009) suggested that one such 'favourable view' was Gaddafi "condemning the Arab and Muslim world for treating their sex 'like pieces of furniture'."

However, Apperly wrote that Gaddafi lost whatever good will he generated when he suggested that women's husbands or brothers should decide whether they should be allowed to drive.

However, Suzanne Moore in the Mail on Sunday (14 June 2009) felt that "the idea of either of these men emancipating women is a sick joke." She added that "both Berlusconi and Gaddafi...get away with behaviour that would not be tolerated in anything resembling a democracy."

Zoe Williams in the Guardian (11 June 2009) questioned Gaddafi's credentials over women, pointing to:

"...an astonishingly poor human rights record that sees women in Libya locked up in 'social rehabilitation centres' for crimes such as 'being raped', 'being orphaned' and 'being poor'. Perhaps he plans to save us western ladies from due process and the rule of law?"

## History

A handful of commentators provided a potted history of Libya. The most salient events given were the death of WPC Yvonne Fletcher outside the Libyan Embassy in 1984, the bombing of Pan-Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Muammar Gaddafi's support for the IRA and the Palestinians, and the US bombing of Tripoli in 1986 which killed the Libyan leader's infant daughter.

Mark Almond in the Daily Mail (12 June 2009) wrote:

"Gaddafi has always been able to parade this loss as proof that he is a victim of 'US terrorism'."

Suzanne Moore in the Mail on Sunday (14 June 2009) lamented that these events in Libya's recent history "are forgotten as the price of oil drops and Gaddafi needs the money. Anyway, Libya is now becoming an attractive tourist destination."

## Ideology

Some confusion and contradiction exists among commentators about what drives Muammar Gaddafi.

Mark Almond in the Daily Mail (12 June 2009) asserted that the Libyan leader came to power via military coup in 1969 "under an Islamic revolutionary banner." However, a few paragraphs later, he stated that Gaddafi "seized power in 1969 under a Marxist banner." Almond also suggested that he "may have proclaimed himself a pioneer of 'Islamic socialism'," and proclaimed "his belief in Arab nationalism."

William Langley in the Sunday Telegraph (14 June) suggested that what drove Gaddafi was "Leninism-lite," and described the Third Universal Theory - "Gaddafi's all-time favourite" - that was set out in his famous Green Book as "an Islamic-Collectivist-Nationalist-Socialist system of government."

Suzanne Moore in the Mail on Sunday (14 June 2009) suggested that "despite his little Green Book, which states that power should be held by people's committees, [Gaddafi] remains very much in control."

Langley agreed (14 June 2009), adding that "nobody stays at the top for four decades without understanding the pathologies of power." Langley suggested, somewhat strangely, that "the West has never understood him" due to the spelling of his name:

"It isn't surprising. His name alone makes him a Google nightmare with at least 30 different spellings: Gaddafi, Gadhafi, Kaddafi, Khadafi, Qudaffi Qadhdhafi..."

Peter Popham in the Independent (12 June 2009) suggested that he has "an undisguised contempt for parliament: Gaddafi never misses an opportunity to dismiss representative democracy."