



Arab Media Watch
for objective British coverage of Arab issues

Monitoring Study:

British Media Portrayals of Libya

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Introduction

Arab Media Watch monitored and analysed commentary on Libya from the British national daily press (apart from the Financial Times) for almost two years: June 2006 - May 2008 (excluding weekends and bank holidays). Most commentators agree that Libya was once a pariah, often regarded as a sponsor of terrorism. Now things have changed, and many have detected in the last few years a shift in the country's status.

However, analysis of the press Libya receives in Britain reveals that overall, the past is not forgotten and suspicions persist - along with a great deal of scepticism about the shift in international politics that allowed the country an attempt at shedding its old image.

Media Conception of Libya

The constitution and political structure of Libya are not described in great detail by the British press when discussing the country. Nonetheless, two things that emerge from what is written are that Muammar Gaddafi looms large in its constitution, and that reform is needed.

Libya features a "brand of Arab socialism" in which public criticism of Gaddafi "is a criminal offence and opposition parties are prohibited," writes Daily Telegraph diplomatic editor David Blair (22 August 2007). This amounts to what Anthony Giddens describes in the Guardian as a "de facto dictatorship" (9 March 2007).

"This mix of Islam and socialism is still enforced by a high-security state apparatus," writes Charles Bremner in the Times (11 September 2007). However, "Libya is not especially repressive," and Gaddafi "seems genuinely popular," according to Giddens.

These commentators agree that reform is necessary and already underway. Giddens paints a fairly upbeat picture of the country's future: "almost every house in Libya already seems to have a satellite dish. And the internet is poised to sweep the country." He says economic and political reforms are much needed - "Libya must change to prosper" - but adds that "impressive progress has been made" in the last few years.

One factor regarded as significant by a few commentators is Seif al Islam, Gaddafi's son and "likely heir" (Guardian Middle East editor Ian Black, 22 August 2007), who is thought to have the vision - at least in theory - to bring about further reform.

He is "his father's emissary and troubleshooter," with plans to "turn the untouched coastline of the country into the Côte d'Azur of North Africa," complete with "a constitution and a limited free press," according to Bremner.

Black reports Libya's proposed structural reforms, including Seif al-Islam's promise of "greater transparency and a fight against corruption," one of several signs that the country is undertaking "gradual reforms which will give it some characteristics of a democracy and market economy."

However, Black notes that "internal change in Libya...has come much more slowly than the dramatic transformation of its international position over the past few years."

Transformation

In the 1970s, Libya and Syria formed "the 'rejection front', dedicated to preventing any partial solution to the Middle East crisis," writes John Bulloch in the Independent (28 January 2008). "The Syrians and Libyans were playing politics."

Part of the game was understanding that "power is best secured by stealth - by infiltrating institutions and seducing the media" - a policy that Gaddafi "once exemplified," according to Ruth Dudley-Edwards in the Daily Mail (5 May 2007). However, to many, this is no longer the case.

There is agreement among all the commentators who discuss Libya in any depth that some kind of 'transformation' has taken place, that the country has undergone 'rehabilitation' from previously being "that most oppressive of regimes" (Independent comments editor and columnist Adrian Hamilton, 14 February 2008) and a "terrorist-sponsoring pariah" (Guardian Middle East editor Ian Black, 22 August 2007).

Many commentators do not easily swallow the common portrayal of Libya as an unruly pupil turned good.

Many recognise that the key moment - a "step to respectability" according to Black (25 July 2007) - was in December 2003 when Gaddafi "handed over his entire inventory of weapons of mass destruction," while also revealing "an illegal stockpile of chemical munitions and a covert nuclear weapons programme," according to Daily Telegraph diplomatic editor David Blair (30 May 2007).

Further factors that accelerated Libya's 'rehabilitation' were compensating the families of those killed in Lockerbie, handing over of the two Libyans accused, and releasing five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor accused of infecting Libyan children with HIV.

Reasons for Transformation

Several reasons are given for this turnaround, with British and US influence seeming to be central. The Guardian suggests it is "another achievement for the EU's much-vaunted 'soft' power - the ability to influence a country through sanctions rather than brute force" (25 July 2007), and that it "must count as a coup for British intelligence and diplomacy" (30 May 2007). However, not all share this view.

The "accelerated abandonment by Libya of its WMD programme" was "one consequence of the invasion of Iraq," argues Times columnist David Aaronovitch (17 March 2008). Oliver Kamm agrees in the Guardian: "We can...verifiably assert that two of the states in the region that previously held WMD - Iraq and Libya - no longer do so, owing directly to our intervention" (25 January 2008).

Greg Hurst in the Times singles out Britain for having played "a leading role in talks that led to Libya giving up its chemical, biological and nascent nuclear programme in late 2003, months after the invasion of Iraq" (30 May 2007).

"Bush and Blair like to cite Libya as an example of the success of their Iraqi model," writes Mark Almond in the Daily Mail (6 July 2006). However, the deal with Gaddafi "leaves him free to murder his domestic opponents in return for a few obsolete blueprints of unbuilt weapons - and

exploration contracts for US companies anxious to extract the oil from Libya which sabotage prevents them from getting out of Iraq."

Libya "was suffering as a result of UN sanctions," says Anthony Giddens in the Guardian (9 March 2007). The paper's assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist Simon Tisdall wonders whether a reason for the turnaround was "US largesse" (18 September 2007).

The Daily Mirror has a similar view: "Sanctions and the lure of financial aid persuaded Libya and North Korea to abandon their nuclear programmes" (13 November 2007). The Independent suggests it was because "Gaddafi - unlike Saddam Hussein - felt the faultlines of international relations shift and removed himself from the list of potential US targets" (5 March 2007).

Gaddafi aside, the particular beneficiaries of the turnaround are frequently said to be those involved with Libya's energy sector. Western investors "are queuing up to modernise the oil-rich country," writes the Guardian (25 July 2007).

One consequence are "ATMs, those humble symbols of capitalism" that "have sprouted in the capital, Tripoli, silently mocking the regime's socialist credentials," notes the Independent (5 March 2007).

Out of the Frying Pan

Opinions as to what Libya's new role amounts to remain similar to the old conception of the country. Its leader is described variously as "a reliable western ally" (Guardian Middle East editor Ian Black, 23 November 2007), "our golden boy" (Independent comments editor and columnist Adrian Hamilton, 14 February 2008), and "the West's pussy cat" (the Independent, 5 March 2007).

Despite these epithets, there is no conviction in them. In fact, there is scant praise at all for Gaddafi, although the Independent describes him as a "bridge-builder 'par excellence'," in the hope of "assisting dialogue between the Islamic world and the West" (5 March 2007).

On the whole, descriptions of Gaddafi are scathing, with the 'transformation' seeming to have left the Libyan leader untouched. Patrick O'Flynn in the Daily Express describes him as "the rank old lion of Libya" (27 March 2007), and the "loathsome" Gaddafi who "saw what had happened to Saddam and came to heel" (10 November 2006).

Independent correspondent Robert Fisk has a scathing take on the leader's new position: "We adore Muammar Gaddafi, the crazed dictator of Libya whose werewolves have murdered his opponents abroad" (16 June 2007).

Libya and the Past

Few commentators write about Libya's 'transformation' without acknowledging the 'seriousness' of the past. The 'transformation' means that Gaddafi "has reaped reward from past misdeeds," writes the Guardian (25 July 2007).

Those misdeeds are routinely listed as the sponsoring of terrorism (most frequently identified as Lockerbie and the IRA), the possession of nuclear technology and other WMDs, and the controversy involving the Libyan children infected with HIV, all of which are things not easily forgotten by the British press.

To accept Libya's new role "involves suspending moral judgment and concentrating on outcome rather than responsibility," argues the Guardian (25 July 2007). For all the noise made about the country's recent efforts towards modernisation, its past - with particular regard to terrorism - is still a major feature of the press it receives.

History provides commentators with various but similar descriptions of Gaddafi:

- "the last of the revolutionaries," who "supported the IRA and other terrorist organisations" (Anthony Giddens, the Guardian, 9 March 2007)
- "once paymaster and arms dealer to the IRA and a host of other terrorist groups" (Daily Telegraph diplomatic editor David Blair, 30 May 2007)
- a "notoriously unpredictable dictator...for decades seen as a sponsor of terrorism" (Henry Samuel, Telegraph, 11 December 2007)
- "the bloodsoaked Colonel" (Daily Mail columnist Amanda Platell, 9 June 2007)

Another feature of his past links with terrorism involves former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who "could persuade himself that it was virtuous and proper to anathematise terrorism while shaking hands with Colonel Gaddafi," according to Geoffrey Wheatcroft in the Mail (3 February 2007).

Tony Blair's visit to Libya in May 2007 received some scathing press. He "was to be found playing footsie with Libyan dictator Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, The Lion of Lockerbie, sipping tea in a Bedouin tent," suggests Mail columnist Richard Littlejohn (31 May 2007).

Others do not see the relationship as quite so objectionable. David Blair notes the turnaround: "Col Gaddafi, once paymaster and arms dealer to the IRA and a host of other terrorist groups, is now on first name terms with the Prime Minister" (30 May 2007). He adds that while Ronald Reagan "sent American bombers to strike Tripoli, Mr Blair pays tribute to a reliable ally."

Mail columnist Max Hastings sees a benefit for Britain: "IRA gunmen...acquired ever-more deadly weapons, before Colonel Gaddafi made friends with Tony Blair" (31 July 2007). The Sun also sees benefits: "there is a good reason for calling in on Libya's Colonel Gaddafi. It was Britain that persuaded this eccentric tyrant to renounce terror and nukes, making the world just a little bit safer" (30 May 2007).

Two stories have a particular hold on the commentators writing about Libya - Lockerbie and the Bulgarian nurses accused of infecting Libyan children with HIV - both of which are seen to reflect very badly on Colonel Gaddafi.

Lockerbie

Lockerbie holds a particular place in Libya's coverage. "Gaddafi's goons blew up Pan-Am Flight 103 in the worst peace-time terrorist atrocity this country has ever seen," states Platell.

However, the Independent suggests that there is "something not quite right about the case against Libya over the Lockerbie bombing," and that "the two Libyans [accused] were scapegoats in an international game."

The paper describes how Robert Black, "the Scottish law professor who had been the principal architect of the trial," offered some corroboration as he lambasted the trial of the two Libyans - one of whom was acquitted - describing "the proceedings as 'a fraud' and 'a disgrace for Scottish justice'."

HIV-Infected Children

On the subject of the nurses accused of infecting Libyan children with HIV, "the Libyan dictator...intimated that the infections were the result of a diabolical plot by Israel's Mossad and the CIA," writes Peter Popham in the Independent, and notes of the accused "the stubborn determination of the Libyan courts to send them to their deaths" (25 July 2007).

The families of the children accepted compensation, which "should help to bring to a close a case that has stirred anti-Western anger in Libya and ensured continued international isolation for Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan leader," suggests Charles Bremner in the Times (18 July 2007).

The nurses were "framed from the word go, pawns in a vile ploy to show that Libya could play the compensation game as well as the lawyers for the Lockerbie victims of Libyan terrorism," writes Rosemary Righter in the Times (20 July 2007). The evidence "comes down to one word: filth. The Benghazi hospital was a hygiene horror story," she adds. "Libya's inhabited margins are filthy."

Libya and its Global Relations

The result of Libya's 'transformation' has had significant effects in its international position. How it is viewed in terms of regional and global strategic importance has changed, causing an upsurge of interest in the subject. What happens in Libya "could have an impact in North Africa and across the Middle East," writes Anthony Giddens in the Guardian (9 March 2007).

However, commentators in the British press differ on what those changes are and how they are manifest. Libyans are "well represented among foreign jihadis joining the Iraqi insurgency over the past year," writes Guardian Middle East editor Ian Black (12 December 2007).

However, Gaddafi was among the signatories of the Arab peace plan of 2002 (which offers Israel full peace in return for a withdrawal from occupied Arab land), writes the paper's columnist Jonathan Freedland (28 March 2007).

There are several headings under which Libya's interactions with other countries can be analysed.

Regional Relations

The fate of the King of Libya (among other regional monarchs) has led the House of Saud to "buy off every conceivable threat and purchase the loyalty of every conceivable ally," suggests Independent comments editor and columnist Adrian Hamilton (1 November 2007).

This idea that threats are never far away is shared by Times comments editor and columnist Daniel Finkelstein, who writes that "the Middle East is dominated by fear societies - back to back, cheek-by-jowl dictatorships. To survive in power, the leaders of fear societies need an external enemy. Hitler chose the Jews. And so did the leaders of Syria and Egypt, Iran and Libya" (20 June 2007).

Sudan

A few commentators suggest that Libya has a particular relationship of note with Sudan, one which Guardian correspondent and columnist Jonathan Steele describes as "volatile" (7 September 2007). One particular aspect of the relationship is Darfur where, according to Independent Africa correspondent Steve Bloomfield, Libya has been "a major player" (25 October 2007).

Guardian columnist Jonathan Freedland writes of the need for Libya - and other neighbouring states - to "put pressure on the rebel groups" with a view to ending the conflict (14 March 2007). On this theme, Gordon Brown and Nicolas Sarkozy, writing in the Times, "welcome" Libya and the other neighbouring states "in support of UN/AU [African Union] efforts" (31 August 2007).

Libya, as well as Sudan and Chad, forms part of "an unlovely alliance with a dry anti-western flavour," writes Guardian assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist Simon Tisdall (14 December 2007).

International Relations

Great Britain

The relationship between Britain and Libya comes up occasionally, often linked in some way to terrorism or the 'war on terror.' Britain has played "a leading role in talks that led to Libya giving up its chemical, biological and nascent nuclear programme in late 2003, months after the invasion of Iraq," writes Greg Hurst in the Times (30 May 2007).

"Bush and Blair like to cite Libya as an example of the success of their Iraqi model," says Mark Almond in the Daily Mail (6 July 2006). However, the deal with Gaddafi "leaves him free to murder his domestic opponents in return for a few obsolete blueprints of unbuilt weapons - and exploration contracts for US companies anxious to extract the oil from Libya which sabotage prevents them from getting out of Iraq."

Terrorist suspects are a frequent aspect of tabloid coverage of Libya. "Welcome to soft-touch Britain, gentlemen," writes the Daily Express in relation to a Libyan citizen released from Guantanamo Bay and returned to the UK (22 December 2007). The paper suggests that his being allowed in "sends out the dangerous signal that we are an easy touch for subversives" (21 December 2007).

The Sun has little sympathy for other Libyans, particularly the two who - much to the anger of the paper - won a case against their deportation: "If they didn't want to be dispatched into the arms of General Gaddafi they shouldn't have been pals with the Taliban and al-Qaeda" (28 April 2007).

The British judiciary is held in special contempt. A "deeply complacent judiciary...still does not appreciate the gravity of the threat to Britain from Islamic extremists," writes the Express (28 April 2007).

"What kind of country do we live in when we can't remove terrorists hell bent on murder?" asks the Sun, commenting on a ruling allowing "a dozen Libyan terror suspects" to remain in Britain (10 April 2008).

Trevor Kavanagh in the same newspaper is unequivocal enough on the subject, but adds the qualifier that they should be convicted: "Deport convicted terrorists to countries like Libya - even if lawyers argue they may be mistreated" (3 July 2007).

However, some sympathy does exist. "Why has the Government abandoned them?" asks Kate Allen in the Independent of returnees from Guantanamo with British wives or children (9 January 2007). In some cases, they are "from countries such as Libya, Iraq or Jordan, where no help is likely," she adds.

Independent columnist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown likewise has sympathy, pointing out that although no charges have been brought, they still face extradition to Spain to face further charges there: "Imagine the state of their minds and bodies, their fears of incarceration...Great Britain, Mr Brown? Tell me about it."

This sense of ruthlessness is felt elsewhere. "Totalitarian China, Saudi Arabia and Libya are welcomed, their purchases [of arms from Britain] subsidised by the British Treasury if need be," writes Guardian columnist Simon Jenkins (14 September 2007).

Torture

Another important aspect of Britain's relationship with Libya is the Memorandum of Understanding that Tony Blair signed with various countries that, according to Independent columnist Andreas Whittam Smith, "habitually practise torture such as Jordan, Libya and Lebanon" (14 April 2008). The MoU agrees not to torture returned nationals who are suspected of some crime.

This would be "unlikely, particularly in Libya where the group which is supposed to monitor independently any breaches of the 'no torture' rules is headed by one of Colonel Gadafy's sons," Smith writes. "The deals were a confidence trick."

However, there are signs that "the deals may well be taken seriously in the three countries - Jordan, Libya and Lebanon - that have undertaken them," argues columnist Deborah Orr in the same newspaper (28 February 2007). Yet Joan Bakewell swings the balance of opinion in the Independent back to scepticism, writing: "The Court of Appeal has just decided that such memorandums are worthless."

Daily Mirror columnist Tony Parsons feels torture would be given fact. He responds to accusations of Britain being a 'police state' by saying the accuser "should mouth off in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Algeria, Syria or Libya if he wants to experience a real police state in action. They would sew up his lips" (12 February 2007).

Rosemary Righter goes further in the Times in describing "conventional Libyan methods" of torture: "sticking cigarettes out on their flesh, rape, sodomy with broom handles, and electric shocks" (20 July 2007).

The US

The US is thought to have had a significant influence on Libya's recent past. "When the US talks of 'exporting democracy' to the region, Libya, curiously, seems not to be on the list of countries requiring reform," notes the Independent (5 March 2007).

Daily Mail columnist Max Hastings highlights the benefit for, and causes of, Gaddafi renouncing his nuclear programme: "Washington and its allies would stop bothering about how many of his own people he tortures or imprisons, and leave him in his tent" (17 January 2007). He added: "Gaddafi decided that he cared more about keeping himself in power than promoting international terror, or indeed the cause of Islam."

The only benefit of US "support for peaceful democratisation in the Bush second term" is "Libya's renunciation of weapons of mass destruction," writes Guardian columnist Timothy Garton Ash (14 December 2006).

However, there is little to suggest a cordial relationship between the two countries. Ryan Henry, principal deputy under-secretary of defence, had "frank" talks with Libya but had "little to show" for them, notes the paper's assistant editor and foreign affairs columnist Simon Tisdall (26 June 2007).