

# Lockerbie – The Cover-up

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The wrong man was jailed for the Lockerbie bombing and the real suspect allowed to escape justice to satisfy political motives, a damning investigation can reveal.

The Scottish Mail on Sunday can today publish remarkable details from a report by two leading investigators which throws major doubt on the conviction of Libyan agent Abdel-baset Ali Mohmed Al Megrahi. He is expected to be freed from a Scottish prison this week after serving eight years of a life sentence for the bombing. The report would have formed the basis of Megrahi's appeal against his conviction, a case which will never be heard after he dropped his legal challenge in return for his early release.

The investigation finds that the man almost certain to have conducted the attack was Mohammed Abu Talb, a convicted Palestinian terrorist with the backing, finance, equipment and contacts to have carried out the atrocity. It also places Talb at the scene where parts of the suitcase bomb were bought – and in Britain when it exploded over Lockerbie. But instead of pursuing Talb and his Iranian backers, the report claims the American and British manhunt was ordered to find a link to Libya and its leader, Colonel Gaddafi.

In a damning verdict on the case, the investigators conclude:

'We are convinced Mr ... Megrahi's conviction was based on flawed evidence ... Megrahi's conviction was based on fundamentally flawed evidence. We have never seen a criminal investigation in which there has been such a persistent disregard of an alternative and far more persuasive theory of the case. This leads us to believe the investigation into the Lockerbie bombing was directed off-course as a result of government interference.'

Talb, serving a life sentence in Sweden for a fatal bombing campaign in the Eighties, was a key witness in the prosecution case against Megrahi in the Scottish courts, for which he received immunity from prosecution. However, the investigation on behalf of Megrahi's defence team by a former UK terror chief and a former US prosecutor who has worked for the British government provides compelling evidence that Talb was the bomber. The report reveals that:

- Talb had clothing from the same Maltese shop as that packed in the suitcase that carried the bomb on board Pan Am Flight 103;
- Talb's alibi that he was in Sweden at the time of the bombing was false, he was in London meeting other terrorists with an unprimed bomb;
- Talb had bribed a corrupt employee at Heathrow to get a suit case through security unchecked;
- Talb was paid \$500,000 only four months after the bombing.

Megrahi is expected to fly to Libya after being granted his freedom on compassionate grounds. Officials insist the move followed assurances he has terminal cancer and has only three months to live. However, it is also understood that a condition of Megrahi's release was that he dropped his appeal, because the UK Government and the Scottish justice system were keen to prevent embarrassing details about the case emerging.

At the centre of the alleged cover-up is evidence that Libya, then a pariah state to the US and Britain, was singled out for responsibility to suit political motives, when in fact the bombing was carried out by Talb on the orders and funding of Iran in revenge for the shooting down of its airliner by a US warship.

The *Scottish Mail on Sunday* has uncovered much of the evidence that would be a source of embarrassment. In recent years, we have revealed that critical evidence was manipulated and even planted, that the key witness was coached by detectives and rewarded for his ever-changing statements and that recent forensic tests conducted on crucial items of evidence shattered the Crown's case.

Now we have obtained documents which outline evidence that the leading player responsible for taking 270 lives in Lockerbie on December 21, 1988, was not Megrahi but Talb. The report carries weight because of the calibre of those who amassed the evidence - Jessica de Grazia, a former senior New York prosecutor who led an investigation for the UK Attorney General's office into the Serious Fraud Office, and Philip Corbett, a former deputy head of Scotland Yard's Anti-Terrorist Branch. Their access to informed sources in Middle East intelligence gives their report particular authority.

Instructed by Megrahi's defence team after his conviction in January

2001, de Grazia and Corbett placed Talb in key locations in Europe with terrorist leaders in the months prior to the Lockerbie bombing. Much of the evidence implicating Talb was known to the Crown and defence prior to the trial of Megrahi. Talb had links to at least two terror groups, in particular the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC) and was a strong suspect. The PFLP-GC, funded by Iran and led by the Syrian Ahmed Jibril, was the first suspect in the Lockerbie case. A cell based in Europe in 1988 was led by Jibril's deputy, Hafez Dalkamoni, with Talb one of their most trusted lieutenants.

However, despite the belief that Iran was responsible, the outbreak of the first Gulf War in 1990 caused a major political shift in the investigation. A secret deal for Allied war-planes to use Iranian airspace to attack Iraq required the US and British governments to stop its pursuit of the Lockerbie bombers and their Iranian connections. Libya was instead chosen as the prime suspect.

When the focus of the investigation switched, the evidence gathered against Talb and the PFLP-GC was effectively discarded by Scottish and US investigators. However, de Grazia and Corbett say evidence almost certainly proved an Iranian-backed plot.

Five months before Lockerbie, the American vessel USS *Vincennes* shot down an Iranian Airbus over the Persian Gulf. All 290 people on board perished. Iran vowed vengeance and promised that the skies would run with the blood of Americans. Three months later, in October 1988, German secret police raided a flat in Germany where Dalkamoni's cell was making Semtex bombs contained in Toshiba radio-cassettes designed to bring down aircraft, identical to the device used in the Lockerbie attack two months later. Although the Germans seized five devices, the bombmaker Marwan Khreesat told them a sixth had been removed by Dalkamoni.

De Grazia and Corbett's investigation reveals that Dalkamoni and Talb had been friends since 1980 and met, including in Malta, in the weeks before the bombing. De Grazia was also told by intelligence sources that 'because of his abilities, Talb was given Lockerbie to carry out'. The investigation says the missing bomb from Germany was probably taken to Malta for safe-keeping before being packed, unprimed, by Talb before its journey to London.

A Maltese connection had also been a focal point of the prosecution's case during Megrahi's trial. They argued that shopkeeper Tony Gauci identified Megrahi as the buyer of clothes later packed in the bomb case. However, de Grazia and Corbett say that Gauci also identified Talb as the man who 'most resembled' the buyer. Although Gauci's evidence about

Megrahi provided key eyewitness evidence to the prosecution's case, it emerged that the store owner had been given paid holidays to Scotland as well as being coached by investigators in his evidence. De Grazia and Corbett say Gauci's evidence against Talb would have been just as strong if it had been pursued. Their report says the most conclusive link between Talb and the clothing bought from Gauci's shop was the discovery of a cardigan in his flat in Sweden. The cardigan was traced to a manufacturer on the Maltese island of Gozo, a firm that supplied Gauci.

The investigation says, based on their evidence, the plan was to launch the attack from Malta but this was dropped because of security at the island's airport. Talb and his colleagues decided Heathrow's security would be easier to crack. It emerged after the bombing there had been a security breach at Heathrow when a lock was forced near Pan Am's airside berths. Corbett describes the probe into the breach as 'inadequate'. Their inquiries uncovered evidence that on an earlier visit to London, Talb bribed an employee to get an unchecked case airside.

Crucially, the report exposes Talb's alibi for December 21. He was not, as he claimed, caring for the children of a relative who was giving birth in a Swedish hospital. They found that on December 19 he sailed from Sweden to Britain, arriving in London on December 21, the day of the bombing. There he met other terrorists, including bomber Abu Elias and Martin Imandi, who are thought to have been in possession of the device left on Flight 103.

After the bombing, De Grazia and Corbett say more evidence emerges linking Talb and his terror cell to the atrocity. They highlight evidence obtained via ex-CIA agent Robert Baer that the Iranian government paid \$11 million into a European bank account held by the PFLP-GC two days later. An account held by Talb in Frankfurt was later credited with \$500,000.

In their conclusions, De Grazia and Corbett recommend forensic scrutiny of the timer fragment that was the only physical evidence in the case that pointed to Libya. That work showed the fragment had never been near an explosion, shattering the case against Megrahi.

The evidence gathered by De Grazia and Corbett would have been the cornerstone of Megrahi's appeal which was expected to have posed a serious challenge to his conviction. However, on Tuesday, as part of the private understanding between the dying Megrahi and the Scottish Executive, his lawyers will drop his appeal. The move will effectively close the chapter on Lockerbie, denying the public the opportunity to hear the full story behind the horror of December 21, 1988.