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## Great Britain Against Libya's State Terrorism in the 1980s

Wielka Brytania wobec terroryzmu państwowego Libii w latach 80. XX wieku

• **Abstrakt** •

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie i ocena postawy Wielkiej Brytanii wobec terroryzmu państwowego Libii w latach 80. XX wieku. Omówione zostały w nim okoliczności zaangażowania się przez władze Libii w proceder, jak również powody skierowania aktywności terrorystycznej przeciwko Wielkiej Brytanii. Zaprezentowano reakcje brytyjskich władz na wspieraną przez Libię przestępczość terrorystyczną oraz wyniki śledztw w sprawie zamachów przeprowadzonych przez Libijczyków przeciwko obywatelom Wielkiej Brytanii. Główną tezą artykułu jest stwierdzenie, że polityka Wielkiej Brytanii, w reakcji na wspieranie przez reżim Muammara Kaddafiego międzynarodowej siatki terrorystycznej, formułowana była zgodnie z głównymi kierunkami polityki Stanów Zjednoczonych wobec Libii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Wielka Brytania, Libia, terroryzm państwowy, lata 80. XX wieku, Stany Zjednoczone

• **Abstract** •

The aim of this paper is to present and assess Britain's attitude towards Libya's state terrorism in the 1980s. It presents the circumstances of involvement of Libyan authorities in the acts of terror, as well as the reasons for directing such activity against the United Kingdom. The paper discusses the response of the British authorities to the Libyan-backed terrorist activity and the results of investigations into attacks perpetrated by Libyans against British citizens. The main thesis of the paper is the statement that the politics of Great Britain in reaction for support offered by Muammar Gaddafi's regime to the international terrorist network was formulated in line with the main directions of US policy towards Libya.

**Keywords:** United Kingdom, Libya, state terrorism, 1980s, United States

According to Ruth Blakeley, state terrorism should be understood as “a threat or act of violence by agents of the state that is intended to induce extreme fear in a target audience, so that they are forced to consider changing their behavior in some way” (Blakeley, 2009). To typologically qualify the terrorist activities undertaken by Libya under Muammar Gaddafi, the classification of states involved to various extent in acts of terror presented by the Israeli International Institute for Counter-Terrorism can be used. The first type are *states perpetrating terrorism*, where terrorist methods are used by state officials; the second type are *states operating terrorism*, defined as ones that initiate, direct and perform terrorist activities through groups outside their own institutions. Finally, the third category are *states supporting terrorism*, that is ones providing financial aid or operational assistance to terrorist organizations (Aleksandrowicz, 2008). In the case of Libya, the state involvement leaned mainly towards the third type – for example, it took the form of assistance for the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which carried out a series of terrorist attacks in the UK using weapons and funds obtained from Libya. Nonetheless, occasionally the officers of the Libyan intelligence participated either indirectly or even directly in organization and implementation of terrorist attacks. In the preparation of these acts, they cooperated primarily with members of Middle Eastern terrorist organizations. Thus Gaddafi’s Libya met also the criteria for belonging to the first (“perpetrator”) category of states linked to terrorism. In Polish literature on the subject one often finds a distinction, according to the objective criterion, between state-sponsored terrorism and state terrorism. The latter type is usually considered either in its direct form (terror carried out by intelligence services officers) or the indirect version (acts of terror committed by persons hired *ad-hoc* by state authorities; Nizioł-Celewicz, 2007). Going by this particular classification, Libya primarily focused on sponsoring international terrorism, while implementing also direct and indirect state terrorism to a limited degree.

On September 1, 1969, a group of officers under the leadership of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi overthrew King Idris I in a military coup. Under the slogan of “Unity, Liberty, Socialism”, the Libyan Arab Republic was consequently established. Dictatorial power rested entirely in the hands of the coup leader. In the global rivalry of superpowers and their allies, Gaddafi declared support for the socialist states of the Eastern Bloc, against the capitalist West. Although Great Britain and its most important ally – the United States – both managed to establish official diplomatic relations with the new Libyan authorities, the relations between these countries were strained from the very beginning.

The aim of the paper is to present and evaluate the actions undertaken by the United Kingdom to counteract Libya’s involvement in carrying out and support-

ing terrorist activity in the 1980s. To understand the problem, it is necessary to enumerate the reasons for participation of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in terrorist activity, as well as the reasons for it being directed against Great Britain. Relations between the United Kingdom and Libya in the period when the latter was perpetrating state terrorism are presented in the context of relations between Libya and the United States as well as relations between the United Kingdom and the United States. The above approach is the consequence of the key thesis of the presented article, which is that the actions of the United Kingdom against Libya in retaliation for Libyan support for the international terrorist network were following in the footsteps of the American policy towards (or specifically, against) that state.

After seizing the power in Libya, Muammar Gaddafi was looking for an external enemy that would serve as an important argument in favour of consolidation of power. This adversary was supposed to, on the one hand, pose a credible threat but, on the other hand, be unlikely to pursue the option of armed aggression against Libya. The logical choice, for three main reasons, were the United States and the United Kingdom. First of all, these countries clearly supported the state of Israel, enemy of the Arab community. Muammar Gaddafi tried to fashion himself an Arab leader, thus Libya could not establish good relations with these countries. Secondly, the United Kingdom was blamed for the centuries-long policy of colonialism, while the United States were perceived as the power that interfered the most in Arab affairs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thirdly, both the United Kingdom and the United States had significant influence in Libya, including military bases on its territory. Gaddafi wanted to free Libya of its colonial and imperial past and thereby lead the state to true sovereignty (Blunty, Lycett, 1987). In 1970, he forced London and Washington to close military bases located in Libya. The date of withdrawal of their military troops by these countries provided an opportunity to establish an official Libyan national holiday (St. John, 2014). In 1973, Gaddafi nationalized Western oil companies investing in Libya, including the British undertakings. It is worth noting that Muammar Gaddafi was hostile to Great Britain also because of his personal experiences – during his participation in several courses offered by the British Army in the UK in 1966 he felt discriminated against and claimed to have been racially insulted by British soldiers.

Already in the early 1970s Muammar Gaddafi established contacts with representatives of the international terrorist network. The main motive of his actions was the fight against Western imperialism and he offered support to groups he considered to have national liberation goals (Tolworthy, 2002). During a speech in June 1972, the Libyan leader announced his intention to support terrorists from the Palestine Liberation Organization (Munazzamat at-Tahrir al-Filastīniyyah) in

their fight against Israel. At the same time, he vowed to take revenge on Great Britain and the United States for the persecutions and betrayals committed by these states on Muslims. In order to shift the fight onto the respective territories of these countries, Gaddafi started financing nationalist groups operating there – the IRA in Great Britain and Black Muslims in the United States (Davis, 1990). In March 1973, the Irish Navy intercepted a ship registered in Cyprus on its way to Ireland and found 5 tons of Libyan weapons for the IRA. This was the first tangible proof that Libya was arming this organization. Muammar Gaddafi declared in a speech that the first of the many shipments for the IRA had been dispatched in June 1972. Consequently, the United Kingdom suspended the sales of armament systems to Libya due to the risk they could be re-exported into the hands of the IRA. At the same time, Britain called on the Libyan government to explain the circumstances of their involvement in arming the Irish Republican Army. The Libyan government maintained support for the IRA as well as continued the transfer of weapons to this organization. Advisers from Libya appeared as well in Northern Ireland, with a task to train and mentor members of the IRA (Schuetz, 1987).

The peak of activity of the Muammar Gaddafi regime as concerns supporting international terrorism was observed in the 1980s. During this period, Libya actively trained, financed and assisted terrorist organizations of various ideological backgrounds, primarily inspired by socialism, nationalism and Islamism. The state maintained close contact with and cooperated with terrorist groups in various parts of the world, mainly in the Middle East, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines, but also in such countries as Ireland, Spain or Japan<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, Libya supported Islamist movements in a number of African countries and anti-American guerrilla groups in Latin America – in Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador and Colombia. In the 1980s, Libya was involved in helping

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<sup>1</sup> Libya was accused of supporting terrorist organizations such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), Basque Homeland and Liberty (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna – ETA), the Palestine Liberation Organization (Munazzamat at-Tahrir al-Filastīniyyah), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (al-Jabha al-Sha'biyyah li-Tahrir Filastin), the Spear of the Nation (Umkhonto in Sizwe) in South Africa, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio Oro (Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro) in Western Sahara, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê – PKK) in Turkey, the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru – MRTA) in Peru, the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka – GAM) in Indonesia, the Free Papua Movement (Organisasi Papua Merdeka) in Indonesia, the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Frente Revolucionária de Timor-Leste Independente), the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste) in New Caledonia, the Republic of South Moluccas (Republic of Maluku Selatan) in Indonesia, the Moro National Liberation Front in the Philippines, the Japanese Red Army (Nihon Sekigun).

about 8,000 terrorists annually prepare their attacks, which made it the second most terror-supportive state in the world after Iran (Phinney, 2003). According to a report by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of January 31, 1985, Muammar Gaddafi used terrorism to strengthen his power and boost the image of his essentially weak regime. During this period, terrorist organizations supported by Libya carried out attacks mainly on the territories of allies of the Western powers, and only sporadically perpetrated acts of terror within the borders of the Western states themselves. According to CIA, this approach should be attributed to fear of retaliatory action on their part (Central Intelligence Agency, 1985).

Intensification of support offered by Gaddafi's regime for the international terrorist network in the 1980s was mainly caused by the US-Libyan military incidents in the Gulf of Sirte (Gulf of Sidra). They began in 1981, when the Libyan dictator claimed almost the entire basin as internal Libyan waters. The Americans rejected this proclamation and continued navy maneuvers in the gulf. As a result, Libyan patrol vessels in the bay were regularly sunk as tensions were high. Both the United Kingdom and Israel strongly supported US military operations in the Gulf of Sidra. Their authorities perceived the naval operations as part of actions aimed at combating international terrorism. In practice, these events resulted in increased involvement of Libya in supporting terrorism, including financing and arming of the IRA operating in the United Kingdom. Coincidentally, the Libyan authorities could also take revenge against Great Britain during the Falkland Islands war with Argentina in 1982 – Libya was supplying arms to Argentina, sending various types of military equipment and weapons, including several dozen hand-held rocket launchers with missiles, mortars, machine guns and mines (Davis, 1990).

In the mid-1980s, the United Kingdom, following after the United States, blamed the Tripoli government for co-organization of a series of terrorist attacks. In March 1984, four Libyans were arrested on charges of committing the bombings at Manchester and Heathrow airports in London. The responsibility for attacks at the airports in Rome and Vienna on December 27, 1985, and the bombing of the Trans World Airlines TWA 840 flight from Los Angeles to Cairo on April 2, 1986 was also laid at Libya's feet. During this period, a curious attack was perpetrated also on the British soil. On April 17, 1984, a British policewoman Yvonne Fletcher – deployed to police the protests organized against Gaddafi's regime in front of the Libyan Embassy in London – was shot dead. A series of shots from a machine gun were fired from the embassy building, and one of the bullets hit the policewoman, who died shortly thereafter at the hospital due to her wound (Cowan, Muir, 2004). Libyan diplomats were accused of this murder. This situation led to the breaking of diplomatic relations between United Kingdom

and Libya and the so-called “1984 Libyan hostage incident” involving the arrest and detention of five Britons in Tripoli, who remained in captivity for 294 days. Finally, in 1999, the Libyan government admitted general culpability in the shooting of Yvonne Fletcher and paid compensation to her family. However, so far no one has been convicted of this murder.

On March 24, 1986 the forces of the United States Navy sunk four more Libyan patrol boats in the Gulf of Sirte (*1986 U.S....*). In retaliation, on April 5, terrorists carried out a bomb attack on the discotheque of La Belle in West Berlin, often visited by American soldiers. American soldiers and a civilian from Turkey were killed in the attack, and over 200 people were injured. Washington and London blamed Muammar Gaddafi’s government for sponsoring and co-organization of this and other “massacres of innocents” in Europe and the Middle East (Phinney, 2003). The involvement of Libya in the Berlin attack was confirmed by the subsequent investigation (Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 2002)<sup>2</sup>. In retaliation, on April 15, 1986, the United States carried out Operation “El Dorado Canyon”, which involved air strikes against military facilities in Tripoli and Benghazi. The main targets, including three military barracks complexes, the airfield in Tripoli and the Benin air base near Benghazi were chosen because of their direct use in carrying out terrorist activities. As a result of the bombing, 45 soldiers and officials and 15 civilians were killed. One of the priority targets was the seat of the Libyan dictator, who however managed to escape with his life. According to representatives of the Libyan government, the air strikes killed the adopted daughter of Gaddafi – Hanna, and injured two of his sons (*1986 U.S....*).

An important role in carrying out Operation “El Dorado Canyon” was played by the United Kingdom. Faced with the Libyan military crisis, the British government pursued a policy in which it distanced itself from the position of the European partners. When the United States turned to their European allies from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for assistance in the Libyan crisis, all countries except Great Britain refused to grant it (Dobson, 1995). UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (05.1979–11.1990) declared manifest support for the military plans set out by the administration of President Ronald Reagan (01.1981–01.1989). The government led by her agreed for American aircraft to conduct air strikes on Libya using the British Air Force (RAF) air bases. This

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<sup>2</sup> Among the four men finally convicted of the attack in November 2001 by the German court was also an officer of the Libyan intelligence – Musbah Abdulghasem Aether. In addition, the judge ruled that Libyan officials were involved in organizing the above attack. On August 17, 2003, the Libyan government paid \$ 35 million in compensation for the families of the attack victims.

divergence of opinions happened despite the initiation in the European Communities (EC) of discussions about significant deepening of political cooperation, which was supposed to take on the form of transformation of the European Political Co-operation (EPC) into the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). London's stance in this matter once again confirmed that in matters of foreign relations and defense policy, the United States were more important for the United Kingdom than European countries. The unambiguously pro-American attitude of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, which did not take into account the interests of the European Communities, gave rise to many unflattering monikers heaped on her in the European press, including the British papers. She was called "Reagan's Poodle" and "Little Lady Echo" (White, 1992). This decision of the British government was aimed at further strengthening the "special relationship" with the United States. It was also a way to express gratitude for the support given to London by Washington during the Falklands War. In addition, the United Kingdom, due to its permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), felt particular responsibility for combating international terrorism. An extremely important factor considered by Thatcher was that Libya sponsored the activities of the Irish Republican Army, perpetrating acts of terror on the British territory. Accusations of the Libyan government supporting the IRA were well documented and confirmed by intelligence reports (Brown, 2010). A significant consideration were also the past imperial traditions of Great Britain, including the occupation of two of the three Libyan provinces (i.e. Tripolitania and Cyrenaica) in the period 1943–1951.

After Operation "El Dorado Canyon" Libya increased its support for the IRA once more. In 1987, the French Navy detained the vessel "Eksund" on its way from Libya to Northern Ireland. The weapons shipment intercepted onboard included a thousand AK47 rifles, a thousand mortars, 600 F1 grenades, 120 RPG-7 grenade launchers, 20 SAM-7 missiles, 2 thousand electronic detonators, 4.7 thousand igniters, two tons of Semtex and over one million rounds of ammunition. The vessel's skipper – Adrian Hopkins – and four members of the IRA were arrested, convicted and imprisoned (Harden, 2011). According to the investigators, information uncovered pointed to many other shipments of weapons from Libya to Northern Ireland having taken place before the interception of the "Eksund".

On December 21, 1988, the most serious terrorist attack in Britain took place over Lockerbie in Scotland. Libya was involved in its organization and financing; as reason for the attack was cited revenge for the air strikes on Tripoli and Benghazi in April 1986, carried out by the United States with the use of British air bases. A suitcase bomb exploded aboard the Boeing 747 aircraft operating the Pan



American World Airways (Pan Am) Flight 103 from London to New York. After the explosion, the plane began to disintegrate in the air, and its remains hit the ground, resulting in the loss of all 243 passengers, 16 crew members and 11 people stricken with fragments on the ground (Greenspan, 2013). Of the total number of 270 fatalities, 189 were US citizens and 43 were citizens of Great Britain. The Libyan government has for years refused to hand over the suspected perpetrators to the Scottish justice system. It was one of the reasons for the imposition by the United Nations of economic sanctions against Libya in 1992. It was only in 1999 that Muammar Gaddafi agreed to extradite the indicted terrorists. On August 16, 2003, his government signed an agreement with the United Kingdom and the United States regarding the Lockerbie bombing. As part of the settlement, Libya accepted its responsibility for the attack (St. John, 2014), agreed to pay damages – in the amount of \$ 2.7 billion – to the victims' families (Wald, 2002) and declared willingness to join the international anti-terrorist coalition. After this event, Libya has been finally, after many years, removed from the US State Department list of countries sponsoring terrorism and economic sanctions against it were lifted (Dębowicz, 2011).

In 2001, Abdelbset al-Megrahi was convicted of murder for having planted the bomb that exploded onboard the plane over Lockerbie. He was sentenced to at least 27 years in prison. His co-defendant – Al Amin Khalif Fhimah – was found not guilty due to lack of evidence. The investigation, however, proved that the attack was carried out by more than one person. In the following years, Muammar Gaddafi lobbied for the release of Megrahi from prison (Butalia, 2011). Eventually, in August 2009 Megrahi was indeed released from prison on compassionate grounds, as he was diagnosed with prostate cancer a year earlier. This decision caused serious tensions in the relations between London and Washington, including a negative impact on the personal relations of Prime Minister Gordon Brown (06.2007–05.2010) and President Barack Obama (01.2009–01.2017). The worsening of the relationship was also due to the Prime Minister Brown's support for the release of the bomber being linked to the British oil company BP plc having been granted a large mining contract in Libya (Dumbrell, 2013).

Because the investigation had not been closed, after Muammar Gaddafi was removed from power the Scottish authorities turned to the National Transitional Council of Libya (Al-Majlis al-Watani al-Intiqali) for help in seeking information that could help identify those collaborating with Megrahi in committing the Lockerbie bombing (PAP, 2011). On October 15, 2015, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service of Scotland and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) announced that two Libyans suspected of complicity in the attack had been



identified. Although their identities were not made public, the British media reported three most likely candidates – among them was Gaddafi's brother-in-law and former intelligence chief Abdullah al-Senussi, the alleged constructor of the bomb – Abu Agila Mas'ud and the intelligence officer supplying the IRA with weapons and explosives – Nasser Ali Ashour (Carrell, 2015). The only person convicted of the bombing, i.e. Abdelbset al-Megrahi, until his death on May 20, 2012 maintained that he had nothing to do with the attack. His family is currently trying to clear his name before the courts (Slawson, 2017). It is one of the reasons why various speculations and conspiracy theories regarding the perpetrators of this terrorist act still persist (Tolworthy, 2002; Ertür, 2014)<sup>3</sup>.

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In the 1980s, Muammar Gaddafi's regime strongly supported terrorist organizations in various parts of the world – mainly those motivated by the ideology of socialism, nationalism and Islamism. It was an element of Libya's foreign policy of that period, whose main leitmotif at the time was anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. Since the colonial and imperial phenomena were identified above all with Great Britain and the United States, these countries naturally became the key adversaries of Libya. The conflict with the Western powers was also intended as a way to achieve the ambitions of the Libyan regime as pertained to gaining influence among Arabs and other Muslim nations. Libya supported, inter alia, the Irish Republican Army operating in the United Kingdom. According to Muammar Gaddafi, Libya was offering its assistance in the fight for liberation of the Irish from British oppression and taking revenge against Great Britain for the crimes committed on the Arabs (Schuetz, 1987). The Libyan intelligence services were also involved in the dramatic bombing of the passenger plane that exploded over Lockerbie, which to this day is the deadliest terrorist attack ever carried out in on British soil. It was perpetrated in retaliation for the British support of the US military operation in Libya, aimed at destroying key military facilities used in terrorist activities. The attitude of the United Kingdom towards Libya, adopted in response to Libyan support for international terrorism, was in line with the US policy towards that country. It was a manifestation of the British understanding of the "special relationship" between United Kingdom and the US. Considering

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<sup>3</sup> Iran's involvement in the bombing is alleged. The media also report allegations that Libya was framed, including directing suspicions towards the United States - for example, there is speculation that the main piece of evidence in the matter, i.e. the printed circuit board for the temporary bomb detonator, had been planted by officers of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

the fact that British citizens fell victim to Libya's state terrorism, London's actions towards Gaddafi's regime can be described as proportionate and even restrained. Nevertheless, they were still more decisive than the actions undertaken by other Western European countries.

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