

Why Libya Welcomed Megrahi

By Ali Aujali

When Abdel Baset al-Megrahi landed in Tripoli following his release from Scotland last week, the world saw a single event in two very different ways. Through the prism of the Western media, Americans saw a terrorist being given a hero's welcome by a country eager to celebrate mass murder. Libyans saw a dying man—believed to be innocent by his countrymen and many others world-wide—being embraced by his family.

The misperception of both the circumstances that led to Mr. Megrahi's release and the reception he received upon his ar-

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rival in Libya has reopened painful wounds for the families of those lost in the Lockerbie tragedy. It's also threatened to derail years of progress and newly restored relations between Libya and the West.

While many take Mr. Megrahi's guilt for granted, there is a large and growing body of evidence that casts serious doubt on his conviction and suggests that an innocent man may have been languishing in prison. This is a view shared by many observers—not only in Tripoli, but in Edinburgh, London, New York, Washington and even among many families of the victims of that terrible act. This perspective has been absent from much of the reporting that has surrounded Mr. Megrahi's return.

Hans Koehler, a U.N.-appointed observer at Mr. Megrahi's trial in 2001, called the conviction a "spectacular miscarriage of justice." In 2007, the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission formally concluded after three years of painstaking inquiry that the conviction of Mr. Megrahi may have been a "miscarriage of justice" in that it rested on evidence that had been discredited. Mr. Megrahi has been pursuing an appeal in order to clear his name. But when he learned of his terminal illness, he gave up this appeal in order to spend his remaining days with his family.

When Mr. Megrahi landed in Tripoli, the reception he was given was not a

"hero's welcome for a terrorist," as some have characterized it. Libyans would not regard any man who they believed to have taken 270 innocent lives as a hero. Just the opposite: We would find such a monster to be abhorrent.

Most of those on the tarmac were members of Mr. Megrahi's extended family and tribe who have followed his plight and know he has very little time to live. The Scottish flags they flew alongside Libyan flags were not an endorsement of the terrible deeds of which he was accused. They were a powerful sign of solidarity between two very different nations that nonetheless share the value of compassion.

There were no parades for Mr. Megrahi, and the streets were quiet the next day in observance of Ramadan. It is worth repeating that the happiness on the faces of his family and his countrymen would be expressed by any people welcoming home a loved one whom they believe was wrongly imprisoned in a foreign land.

It is important to reiterate that the Libyan people stand firmly and unequivocally alongside America and the West in the fight against terrorism. As anyone who has spent time with Libyans can attest, we are a compassionate people, and we feel deep sympathy for those who

lost loved ones in the Lockerbie bombing, just as we do for the victims of any terrorist attack. We are confident that, when presented with the facts, the American people and the international community will not misconstrue our warm welcome for Mr. Megrahi as indicative of support for terrorism.

Those who have followed events more closely will know that Libya has a strong record of opposing terrorism. Libya was the first nation to issue an arrest warrant for Osama bin Laden in 1998. We condemned the horrific attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. And we have been one of the West's key partners in fighting the spread of al Qaeda in North Africa and interdicting extremists on their way to Iraq to attack U.S. forces.

We are hopeful that the cooperative relationship we have re-built with the United States will survive the tumult of the past week. Our nations have a great deal to offer one another culturally, diplomatically and commercially. We can set an example to the rest of the world about how to solve differences through diplomacy rather than hostility.

Mr. Aujali is the Libyan ambassador to Washington.

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