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I thought the Lockerbie bombing was a closed case until I started asking questions

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Myles Bonnar
BBC Disclosure

Officials inspect the wreckage of Pan Am flight 103 on 21 December 1988

Getty Images

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I was only a year old when the UK's deadliest terror attack shocked the world.

In December 1988, Pan Am flight 103 exploded - killing all 259 people on board as well as 11 on the ground in the Scottish town of Lockerbie.

I was a teenager by the time Libyan intelligence officer Abdelbaset al-Megrahi was convicted of the bombing in 2001 and, when he later died, I thought that was largely the end of the story.

It wasn't.

The case still rumbles on and, later this year, a man suspected of making the bomb which blew up the plane, Abu Agila Masud, goes on trial in Washington DC.

As part of a [Radio 4 Intrigue podcast series](#), I had an opportunity to delve into this complex case with fresh eyes.

The deeper I dug, the more complicated Lockerbie became and there have been times that I don't know what to believe.



Abdelbaset al-Megrahi was the only man convicted of the Lockerbie bombing

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Jim Swire, on the other hand, is sure what he believes - and it is not the official story.

His daughter Flora died in the bombing, but he is convinced that whoever killed her got away with mass murder.

Swire believes Megrahi is innocent, even befriending the convicted bomber up until his death in 2012.

"The burning issue was to get to the truth," he says.

"Always has been, always will be and I will not shut up about what I know to be true."

Swire's doggedness has made him a prominent voice but most of the Lockerbie victims' families don't agree that Megrahi's conviction was a miscarriage of justice - and the bomber's own appeals against the verdict either failed or were abandoned.

For Swire, the simplest explanation is that Iran was behind the attack - not Libya.

The Lockerbie bombing came five months after 290 people were killed when an Iranian commercial airliner was shot down by a US battleship.

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Iran swore revenge and months later Pan Am flight 103 exploded on its way to New York.

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Getty Images

Jim Swire's daughter Flora died in the Lockerbie bombing

And there's more.

Iran - much like they do now - used proxy militant groups to pursue their ends.

Before the Lockerbie bombing, a militant cell based in Frankfurt, part of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC), was foiled by German police.

Police arrested suspects and seized explosive devices, concealed in radio cassette players, that were designed to trigger at altitude.

The bomb that brought down Pan Am 103 was in a radio cassette player hidden inside a samsonite briefcase.

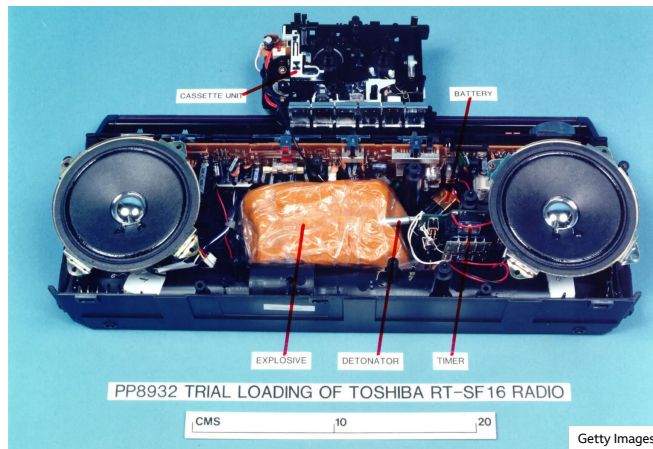
Because of this, Swire believes the device that brought down Pan Am 103 was loaded at Frankfurt, and not Malta as the court had concluded.

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A mock-up of the explosives-loaded Toshiba cassette recorder which blew up Pan Am Flight 103

And, for Swire, this is only the tip of the iceberg.

He also questions much of the evidence presented at the 2001 trial, discredits witnesses, and is extremely suspicious of the involvement of intelligence agencies - like MI5, MI6 and the CIA - in the aftermath of the bombing.

Combine these suspicions with his all-consuming grief and you can see why Swire is such a force to be reckoned with on his quest for a truth he believes has been denied to him.

"Discovering the truth became my way of handling the consequences of the grief reaction," Swire says.

"And it was very tough for other people to understand that but that's just the way I'm made, I suppose."

Dick Marquise, who led the FBI's Lockerbie task force, says that in the early days of the case he too believed the PFLP-GC were the "number one suspect", but years of investigation found nothing to prove it.

"There was not one shred of evidence that could be taken to court and get a conviction," he says. "You couldn't do it. There was nothing."

However, there are others, besides Swire, who still question the "official narrative" - including former CIA agent John Holt who also believes Iran was behind the bombing.

Holt worked with Libyan intelligence assets in the 1980s and was the handler of double agent Abdul Majid Giaka, whose information became central to the investigation into the Lockerbie bombing.

Holt now believes Giaka was a "BS artist" who was out for money and was feeding the CIA fake stories to get paid.

"I didn't think much of him at all," he says.

"He gave us some little tidbits about what was going on, but he never knew anything about the Pan Am bombing. And he knew a lot about Megrahi," Holt says.

Holt believes the fact the CIA bankrolled Giaka devalues him as an informant.

"It makes it easier for somebody to say whatever the person who's giving them money wants them to say," Holt says.

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Members of the armed forces collect debris from residential gardens after the mid-air explosion of Pan Am Flight 103

I managed to get a hold of the CIA papers - known as cables - from the time, which showed what Giaka had told the Americans.

The cables date back to the months before Lockerbie and include notes of conversations between Giaka and Holt and two earlier CIA handlers.

Within the cables, Giaka places Megrahi in Malta - where the bomb was said to have been planted - at a key time in the Lockerbie plot.

Megrahi is also said to have visited a Maltese clothes shop, buying shirts and baby grows - which were placed in the suitcase with the bomb and later found at the plane crash site.

Giaka had even talked to the CIA about eight kilos of orange-coloured explosives stored at the Malta airport offices. Semtex, the explosive used in Lockerbie, is orange.

In the 2001 trial, Giaka was to be a "key" witness in the prosecution's case but the four judges described some of his evidence as "at best grossly exaggerated and at worst simply untrue".

The Senussi files

Decades on from Megrahi's conviction, new intelligence documents have been recovered allegedly from the heart of Libyan intelligence.

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They are believed to have come from Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi's notorious intelligence network run by his spy chief Abdullah Senussi.

These leaked Libyan intelligence documents contain information that could potentially put an end to the doubt, theories and countertheories that have tied so many, including me, in knots.

The original 'Senussi Files', as they are now known, were shown to French journalists who later published a book, *The Murderer Who Must Be Saved*.

I travelled to Paris to meet one of the authors, investigative journalist Vincent Nouzille.

He brought piles of documents, enough to cover the whole bed and the hotel room desk.

You can tell he loves his work and despite having pored over these documents for years, he's still awestruck by their content.



Lockerbie bombing accused Lamin Khalif Fhimah (left) with Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi after his acquittal in 2001

Some of the Senussi files date back to autumn 1988, in the months before Lockerbie, and contain documents apparently detailing plans to target aircraft on multi-stop flights using a 11-hour long-delay timer bomb concealed in luggage much like the Lockerbie bombing.

It even mentions tests on concealing a device inside a tape recorder.

As we go through each document, my head is spinning.

There are references to dry runs, apparent weaknesses in airport security, and enough detail about the movements of Megrahi and others for Nouzille to crosscheck dates and places against other sources.

Nouzille says he spent three years carefully verifying everything in the files.

He shows me another file which details the apparent movements of Megrahi and Masud, coming in and out of Malta.

This account lines up with the information provided in the CIA cables from the previously discredited Giaka.

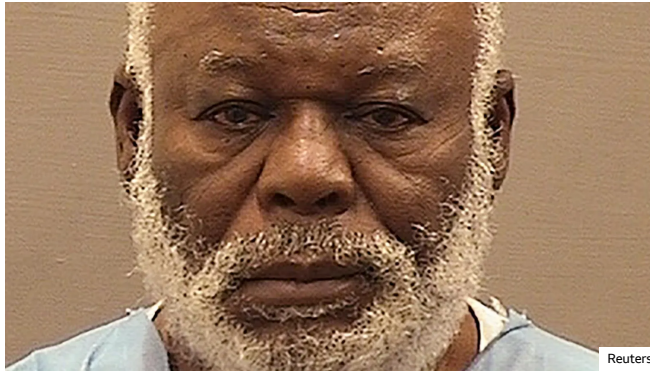
"We know from the CIA cables that Giaka reported the same people, the

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Abu Agila Masud is accused of making the bomb that blew up Pan Am flight 103

The Senussi Files seem to corroborate several details first mentioned in the cables, including the presence of semtex at Luqa Airport in Malta.

Nouzille shows me a translated document, signed by Megrahi, dated January 87, which mentions "10 kilos of explosive material" stored at the airport by Lamin Khalif Fhimah, the man who stood trial alongside Megrahi in 2001 but was acquitted.

I tried to contact Fhimah via his trial lawyer to put these allegations to him, but I was unable to reach him.

Nouzille concedes that these documents are not "final proof" that Libya was targeting Pan Am 103 flight, but he believes this is evidence of their modus operandi.

"We have a preparation of a multi-stop flight and a suitcase - and after 11 hours the bomb will explode," Nouzille says.

The Senussi Files that Nouzille has are copies, not originals, so they cannot be forensically tested.

It remains to be seen whether they will be admissible in the upcoming trial.

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If they're authentic, these files may prove once and for all that Megrahi was guilty.



Paul Hudson, whose daughter Melina was one of the victims, holds up a banner outside the federal court in Washington DC

As Nouzille packed away the documents, I thought of Jim Swire and what this could all mean for him.

He's devoted his life to this case - even befriending Megrahi during his quest to find answers.

However, despite the years spent by Nouzille to authenticate the documents, the Senussi Files have failed to convince him that Libya was responsible.

Swire says: "I don't think that you should, with your eyes open, go into believing that any documents, however perfect they may seem to be, are genuine which prove conveniently that this was a Libyan job."

He said the CIA had the ability to forge any documents they wanted.

Despite several delays, Masud is due to go on trial in August this year.

Whether this will be pushed back again remains to be seen.

It's very likely that historical evidence from the original Lockerbie trial will be brought under the microscope once again - opening up old wounds and catalysing a new era of questioning.

Or, if admissible and verified, the Senussi Files might prove once and for all what Dick Marquise and other investigators have been saying all along.

New documents blame Libya for Lockerbie bombing
An atrocity that caused heartbreak around the world

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