

# Kebabs over Baghdad?

**By Torcuil Crichton**

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**A** HAPPY St George's Day it is not. For George Galloway, Iraq war iconoclast, expelled Labour MP, tabloid-branded traitor, Friday should have been spent in Amsterdam doing what he does best – speaking at a peace conference. Instead, he has to ruin the Dutch organisers' day just as The Sun ruined his. Galloway, who is trying to fight his way back from political isolation, has been shot down again by accusations on The Sun's front page that he pocketed more than £1 million from Saddam Hussein.

Galloway is furious, exasperated and, for once, unable to reach for the libel lawyers – something he finds particularly galling because he has an enviable record of winning in court. This time the allegation that Saddam rewarded him with cash-redeemable vouchers under the UN food for oil programme was made in the US congress under a parliamentary privilege that allows the “grand lie”, as Galloway describes it, to be repeated with impunity across the globe.

The story that he was Saddam's stooge keeps swirling around Galloway, leaving a scent of scandal that is hard to remove. At one time, he was just called an apologist for Baghdad but this is the third time in a year he has been openly accused of taking cash from the Saddam regime.

The latest smear, he says, comes – like the others – from his sworn enemies in the Iraqi National Congress, an exiled anti-Saddam organisation funded by the US government and led by wanted criminal Ahmad Chalabi. The INC supplied the US with much of the now discredited information on Saddam's weapons programme that led to war in the first place. Now, with some Congress members gunning for it, the INC is creating a smokescreen.

“This sewer is trying to smear all the opponents of the war, the UN, the French and Russian governments, even the Pope. I just happen to be one of them,” says Galloway. “It is a very simple thing to establish who bought and sold oil from Iraq because it had to be done under the UN Security Council. It's self-evident that I have never signed any contracts or bought or sold any oil. If the allegation is that someone did on my behalf, then who, when and how did they pass this money to me? Nobody can produce any evidence of this.” The allegations, Galloway holds, are the same as those made by the Daily Telegraph, which accused him of benefiting to the tune of £375,000. He sees them in court on November 14

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and is confident of victory.

There is, of course, a thread that connects Galloway to Saddam's oil vouchers. Fawaz Zureikat, a wealthy Jordanian businessman and Galloway associate who traded in oil and electronics with Iraq, is also named in the papers presented to the US Congress. Zureikat chaired the Mariam Appeal, which Galloway launched to pay for the cancer treatment of young Iraqi girl Mariam Hamza and to campaign against UN sanctions. Galloway has never hidden the fact that Zureikat was involved in the oil trade.

"In the Mariam Appeal he was our second biggest benefactor and from the very beginning we made it clear that he was a businessman doing business with Iraq among other people. He was a registered oil trader. If the suggestion is that he was handing me money from the Iraq regime then someone has to provide evidence of that."

His political memoir, *I'm Not The Only One*, is being pitched by the publishers as a British version of Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men*, but mostly it is an anti-war manifesto for Respect, the anti-war coalition that will pitch him against Blair in the June European elections. His future is in Respect he says, or in opening a kebab shop in Beirut.

Disparate anti-war groups and fellow musketeers like Scottish journalist Ron Mackay have gathered around this vehicle for Galloway's political redemption. All the campaigning ingredients, apart from time and funding, are in place. A stack of begging letters to wealthy potential supporters is piled on the floor of his Commons office.

People often assume Galloway is well-off – the Kenzo suits, the cigars and the numerous libel awards. Well, why should the fascists get all the good suits and why can't a left-wing tribune of the people enjoy a fine cigar? For some, this explanation isn't enough. Charred documents found in the Baghdad's ruins last year appeared to link Galloway to \$10m bribes from Saddam's son. The papers, which formed the basis for a story in the *Christian Science Monitor*, turned out to be crude fakes that cost the US newspaper substantial damages.

The *Telegraph* made similar but less preposterous allegations. It claimed Galloway was making £375,000 a year from Iraq. He sees the whole thing as an orchestrated smear against anyone who stood against the US and Iraqi National Congress plans; "a smokescreen for the disaster".

Galloway is confident of clearing his name and actually quite hurt. "These casual smears and attacks – the cheque at the end doesn't make up for the slings and arrows. Being traduced and lied about is painful and happens to me with extra ordinary regularity."

Most recently, Julie Burchill in the *Times* confused him with former Leith MP Ron Brown, and accused him of breaking into a woman's house and stealing her knickers. Kerrr-ching, the register rang, and Burchill issued an unprecedented apology. "That reminds me, I still haven't had the cheque."

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Galloway himself is pretty good at wielding the stiletto – or the short sword, as he prefers to call it. His book cuts deep into the ribs of former colleagues who, in truth, never had much time for him or his plugged-in view from the Arab street.

He's travelled widely for the Iraqi people but the furthest journey is from the Labour party. "I felt able to operate in the Labour party in its many guises but this era, New Labour, is actually anti-Labour. That's why it's become impossible. The hijackers have [the party] by the throat and won't let go until they hear the death rattle." Then another regret: "I should have resigned on the night hundreds of Labour MPs voted for the war. I regret it in principle and in practice because if I had, we would have had a year more to build this alternative to New Labour."

Instead he was expelled from his party of 36 years for describing George Bush and Tony Blair as wolves falling on the people of Iraq. "It felt like a knife going in when the verdict was delivered: 'You are expelled from the Labour party forthwith.'" Galloway chews on the word again like the stub of one of his trademark cigars. "Forthwith. It's a wonderful Old Labour word."

Since his epiphany, at 23, from Dundee Labour party activist to champion of the Palestinian cause, Galloway has had a love affair with the Middle East. As council leader, he flew the Palestinian flag over Dundee, hugged Arafat when he was a pariah and yes, he met Saddam Hussein on two occasions.

He has not contributed to a Commons debate since his expulsion and is a loss to parliament. Although he generally divides the green benches into those who hate him and those who plain dislike him, when he talks in the Commons, with that rare political commodity, passion, he is listened to. Galloway is one of the most talented orators of his generation.

On a cold February day in 2003, in front of a million people in Hyde Park, his speech captured the essence of Britain's biggest ever mass protest. As protesters shuffled off into the evening gloom, Galloway declared the foundation of a worldwide political movement. With Respect, a tiny organisation that has about 40 days to deliver him from the wilderness and convince disenchanted voters, he is serving notice on the world's leaders.

Respect stands for respecting equality socialism, peace, the environment, community and trade unionism. In the London Euro-region where he will be number one on the PR list, Galloway could be elected on 87,600 votes, replacing the current Green MEP, Jean Lambert. Respect is aiming for 100,000 votes. "From a disparate constituency of Arabs, Irish, Bengali, Afro-Caribbean, trade unionists, Trotskyites, peaceniks and Labour refusniks it ought to be do-able," he says.

He doesn't mention Scots. Respect is not fielding candidates in Scotland and Galloway is

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asking voters to support the anti-war Scottish Socialist Party. Truly he has finished clinging to the chimera that the Labour party might be saved from Blair or his inheritors. “I am gambling everything on this. If Respect just fails to win it might be different, but if it’s a miserable failure then undoubtedly I will be looking at a different life.”

Well, not quite. Galloway still has one card left to play that would put plans for a Beirut kebab shop on hold. He wants to stand in next year’s general election – most likely, in the new Glasgow Central seat into which the Kelvin constituency is subsumed. The contest would pitch him against Labour MP Mohammad Sarwar. This is the first time he has spoken publicly about his plans.

“It’s my intention to fight for a seat at the general election. Exactly where we will wait and see. It’s not finalised in my mind,” he says, fully aware of the enormity of what he would be asking of his Glasgow supporters. “I’d be asking all my friends in the party to face expulsion if they helped me, and asking a large number of Muslims in Glasgow to vote against a Muslim MP, albeit one that hasn’t exactly represented them in the way they would have liked. On the other hand I will have represented almost half of that new constituency for 20 years. Do I walk away from them? I haven’t made my mind up but if it’s Scotland, it will be Glasgow.”

By then he will either be mired in oil-stained allegations of profiteering, or smelling sweetly of further libel winnings. It will make little difference, he thinks. “From experience I know that most people don’t believe these things and those who are predisposed to are people who would never vote for me anyway.”

*I’m Not The Only One by George Galloway is published by Penguin, £10*