

PolicyWatch #1435

## Rebuilding U.S.-Libyan Relations Twenty Years after Lockerbie

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Nearly twenty years ago, on December 21, 1988, PanAm Flight 103 from London to New York exploded in midair over the Scottish town of Lockerbie, killing all 259 people on board. Last weekend, according to an unconfirmed report in the *International Herald Tribune*, Musa Kusa, the Libyan intelligence chief widely believed to have planned the terror attack, visited Washington for talks with intelligence and military officials. The same week saw a telephone conversation between President Bush and Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, a meeting at the State Department between Qadhafi's eldest son Saif al-Islam and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and the Senate confirmation of the first American ambassador to Libya in thirty-six years. This new chapter offers areas of cooperation, but the United States must proceed with caution.

### Diplomatic Smoke and Mirrors

The Lockerbie attack was a crisis in Libya's relations with the United States and the rest of the world. To avoid the brunt of responsibility, Colonel Qadhafi eventually blamed rogue intelligence agents, and one, Abdelbaset Ali al-Megrahi, was found guilty by a special Scottish court. Despite repeated attempts to reopen his case and reports that he is dying of cancer, al-Megrahi is still in a Scottish prison. Libya did agree to pay financial compensation to the victims' families, a slow process that eventually led to payouts last week from a fund that includes monies from U.S. corporations wanting to do business in the north African state. The fund also compensates relatives of a 1986 bombing of a German disco, where U.S. servicemen were targeted, as well as Libyan victims of U.S. air strikes ordered in retaliation for the disco bombing, which has created legal and diplomatic controversy.

The way forward for U.S.-Libyan relations is complex. Until the 1980s, U.S. oil companies had good ties with the country, which is a member of OPEC and a significant supplier to southern Europe. (Tripoli plans to increase production from the current 1.8 million barrels per day (b/d) to 3 million b/d by 2013.) The recent surge in oil revenues, though halted by the price collapse, means there is money available for imports and infrastructure investment, for which U.S. corporations would be eager to compete. Qadhafi's renouncement of weapons of mass destruction in 2003 after being caught buying a uranium enrichment plant designed by Pakistan was an additional and key factor in rebuilding U.S. ties. His armed forces, once dependent on Soviet weaponry, need modernizing, and Moscow wants that role -- three Russian warships visited Tripoli last month. Ironically, Libya is also a counterterrorism partner: Qadhafi's main source of domestic opposition is Islamists.

### Realpolitik

In the midst of the financial crisis and the Obama transition, last week's diplomacy attracted little media attention. But for U.S.-Libyan ties to develop further means working with Libyans whose backgrounds could be a political burden, among them Colonel Qadhafi himself, once described by President Reagan as "the mad dog of the Middle East." Qadhafi retains tight control over his country, allowing few political freedoms. Last week the brother of an imprisoned democratic dissident, Fathi Eljahmi, wrote in the *Washington Post* of his continuing incarceration, "ignored by the State Department," though he had been freed for two weeks in 2004

after the intervention of then Senator Joe Biden. Earlier this month, several people died in clashes with security forces during reported anti-regime protests in the southeastern province of Kufra.

Musa Kusa, currently the head of external intelligence, is said to have direct ties not only to the Pan Am 103 and Berlin bombings but also an assassination plot in 2004 against then crown prince, now king, Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Kusa was also responsible for attacks on Libyan dissidents abroad when he headed the Libyan Peoples' Bureau (or embassy) in London, for which he was expelled. There is no record of his ever acknowledging that such attacks were wrong or expressing remorse for them; Kusa once bragged that he knew the name of every Libyan with a beard, that is, those who may be religious activists. As former CIA head of counterterrorism Vince Cannistraro has said, Kusa has "blood on his hands all round the world."

Abdul-Fatah Yunis, who reportedly accompanied Kusa to Washington, is the secretary of the General People's Committee for Public Security, effectively Libya's interior minister and therefore responsible for an important part of the internal security apparatus that represses dissent.

The most acceptable Libyan to the United States is probably Saif al-Islam Qadhafi, the most prominent of the Libyan leader's sons and the most pro-American. (Other sons have gained some notoriety, including Hannibal, who was arrested by Swiss police for assaulting two servants during the summer.) This month, Saif called for the investment of some of Libya's \$100 billion sovereign wealth fund into American corporations; furthermore he wants to send thousands of Libyan students to study in the United States and would like U.S. colleges to open up branches in Libya. Though lacking an official title, Saif is seen as a potential successor to his father. He recently called for Libya to have a "constitution, democracy, [and] elections, like any other country."

### **Working with Washington**

Counterterrorism is the most obvious area of cooperation. Since 2001, Libya has been keen to cooperate with the United States by sharing intelligence. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group had long had contact with al-Qaeda and initiated sporadic armed attacks on Libyan security forces in the 1990s. It was also reportedly one of the groups believed to have planned the terrorist attack in Casablanca in 2003. Musa Kusa had already met with a number of U.S. officials, including high-ranking figures such as William Burns, assistant secretary of state, Ben Bonk, the deputy head of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center in 2001, and Condoleezza Rice in 2007.

The issue of AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), as the newly relaunched Algerian GSPC (Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat) is known, was likely discussed during Musa's visit. This group, which formally swore allegiance to al-Qaeda in September 2006, has publicly expressed its wish to target Libya. It has so far carried out a variety of bloody attacks in Algeria. More recently, its affiliates kidnapped Austrian tourists in Tunisia and shot French tourists in Mauritania. The rumored presence of Libyans in AQIM, and Tripoli's fears of Algerian terrorist infiltration of Libya would have provided the context for the discussion. Another mutual security concern is the Sahelo-Saharan smuggling networks. These groups, through which contraband, people, and weapons pass, indirectly benefit terrorist and rebel groups, as well as demonstrating the nexus between organized crime and terrorism.

The role of AFRICOM, the new U.S. African military command to improve military and counterterrorism capabilities on the continent, was no doubt broached by the United States in the latest meetings. This topic was raised by Rice on her recent trip to Libya; she acknowledged the difficulty Washington has been having with Libya in this field. The United States is eager to establish military-to-military relations with the Libyan officer corps. Yet so far, Libya has been a staunch opponent of AFRICOM and U.S. presence on the continent. Seeing himself as the leader of Africa, Qadhafi has championed a "United States of Africa," including a united currency and pan-African parliament. President Bush spoke last week of the close of a "painful chapter" in U.S.-Libyan relations. The next chapter will be for President-elect Obama, whose own African origins have elicited concern from Qadhafi.

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