

Middle East Report by Omar al Montasser

Libyan opposition betrayed again

While the U.S. was staging its show of hatred for Qaddafi, it was also sending good will messages to Tripoli.

What was the Jan. 5 dogfight between American and Libyan jetfighters really about? Was it a last attempt by the departing Reagan administration to get rid of Libya's Muammar al Qaddafi? The dogfight, which ended in the shooting down of the two Libyan MiG jets, occurred just as the United States was sponsoring a global campaign against the Libyan chemical plant of Rabta.

Yet, as events since seem to have proven, if a government has been destabilized by this campaign, heralded by the Jan. 7-11 Paris conference on chemical weapons, it is not Libya's, but West Germany's. Topping it all, just before he left office, President Reagan announced that it had never been his intention to bomb the Rabta plant.

The aims were indeed elsewhere. While tensions between Europe and the United States over Libya became public, the French government quietly decided to extend a 7 billion-franc credit to Algeria at the end of January. The credit is a badly needed boost to the Algerian economy, and is helping to settle a dispute over the Algerian-French gas deal, but Paris made its political content quite clear. Less than 24 hours after the loan was ratified, diplomatic sources said that its ultimate aim was to break "Algerian dependency on the United States" for food supplies. With preferential rates, Algeria will be able to buy French wheat.

North Africa's importance for the United States was underlined almost at the same time by U.S. Air Force-Europe Commander, Gen. William L.

Kirk. Reflecting on the tighter limitations imposed on the U.S. Air Force on low-flight training over Germany, Kirk announced negotiations for such training to take place in Morocco. Morocco has already signed similar cooperation treaties with the French and Belgian air forces and is finalizing a similar agreement with the British air force.

In that framework, the policy toward Libya has not been one of serious confrontation. At most, it aimed at making it clear to the Libyan leaders that the Anglo-Americans are serious about their regional stakes, and won't brook interference. Meanwhile, it ran parallel to equally public attempts at mending fences between the U.S. and Libya.

For example, throughout October and November, intense talks went on in Geneva between Libyan and American oil officials. The topic was whether the U.S. oil companies would be resuming operations, since the U.S. embargo imposed in 1986 was running out on Dec. 31. At the peak of the anti-Rabta campaign, Reagan could obviously not afford to drop the embargo. It was renewed, but only for six months, until June 30, 1989—a decision hardly reflecting the commitment of an administration dedicated to overthrowing Qaddafi.

The word is now out that the companies will be resuming operations by June. New drilling contracts are being discreetly negotiated. The U.S. administration has let it be known that it perfectly understood that unless operations were resumed, the bulk of the new Libyan contracts would go to Eu-

ropean firms, besides U.S. assets being nationalized. A compromise may be ultimately found with U.S. firms operating in Libya, not directly but through their European subsidiaries, whereby U.S. oil technology will find its way back to the shores of Tripoli.

Yet, intelligence sources report that Washington has gone further to send signals of good will to Tripoli. Libya was made aware that a worked-out plan of the Libyan opposition group led by Mohammed al Margariaff was being set into motion. The plan called for simultaneous actions in the Oasis of Kufra, one of Libya's key military bases, and in Tripoli and Benghazi. As it has become almost a tradition, the plot was foiled, and its architects within Libya rounded up.

Who told Qaddafi is anyone's guess. So many countries were involved, that the culprits could have hidden their tracks under several layers of cover. Foiling the plot was a further step toward sending the "right message" to Qaddafi. On the one hand, it showed that the U.S. could, at any time, organize a "Contra-like" movement on Libya's southern borders. On the other, it made it clear that Washington was ready to bargain. Obviously the Libyan opposition leaders had been told a different story, but they should have realized that the Gorbachov fans ruling Washington are not about to destabilize a regime which, for all intents and purposes, is still a key Moscow ally in the region.

Hence, intelligence sources stress that the Jan. 5 dogfight was the end of the crisis, not its start. From both sides, it served as a cover for their diplomatic commitments. Ever since, Qaddafi has been making public statements one after the other on his readiness for good relations with both Washington and London. These statements, unlike past ones, reflected no Libyan fear or paranoia toward the United States.