

# The Lockerbie Trial Intensifies

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### Brief Analysis

The Lockerbie trial about to be resumed in the Netherlands will soon enter one of its most important stages. In the coming sessions a critical witness, a Libyan double agent, will take the stand. The testimony of this defector is expected to confirm not just the complicity of the suspects but also the use of Libyan Airline facilities in Malta for intelligence purposes. Indeed, this may prove to be the most important piece of evidence proffered by the prosecution in their long struggle to see that the Libyan suspects are convicted.

Seen as one of the most significant criminal proceedings in the history of Scottish jurisprudence, the Lockerbie trial, which began on May 3, took a remarkable turn during the past month. Among the characters that surfaced were a series of unsavory European businessmen, former East German intelligence agencies, and an alleged Iranian defector. But despite the high drama that is permeating the proceedings, the prosecution is quietly defying its detractors by meticulously constructing a plausible case for the conviction of the two suspects.

Libya Linked to the Evidence During the past month, the prosecution has concentrated its efforts on linking the two suspects to the detonating device manufactured by the Swiss firm MEBO and discovered in the aircraft wreckage. Taking the stand, Edward Bollier, the owner of MEBO, offered riveting testimony on his dealings with the suspects and with Libyan intelligence agencies. In the course of his testimony, Bollier acknowledged delivering twenty timers with MST circuit boards to the headquarters of the Libyan secret service and confessed that his company constructed briefcases with the necessary mechanisms to detonate bombs from remote locations. Bollier even advised his Libyan contractors on how to assemble the bombs and witnessed a test run of the timers at a training installation in Libya's Sabha Desert. During this test, a bomb was detonated on an airborne aircraft, Bollier informed a stunned courtroom during his five days on the stand. Bollier defended his conduct by suggesting that Libyan intelligence officials assured him that the timers would be used for destroying Libyan camps and equipment in Chad; Bollier acknowledged that while in Tripoli he met Libyan defendant Abel Basset al-Megrahi, who seemingly acted in an official military capacity. The timing, however, seems to negate such a rationalization as Libya had essentially disengaged from Chad in 1986, the year of the bombing, while its purchase of the timers continued beyond that date. In the end, the Swiss businessman's testimony not only directly implicated the suspects but also demonstrated the extent to which Libyan preparations resembled the actual explosion.

The prosecution's case has long been based on the belief that the suspects placed a Samsonite suitcase containing the bomb on a plane in Malta, and the court has now been presented with conclusive evidence placing one of the suspects in Malta before the explosion. The prosecution unveiled passports, hotel registration cards, and a telephone

call invoice confirming that al-Megrahi was in Malta on December 20 and 21 (the bombing took place on the 21st), evidence that further buttresses the connection between Lockerbie and Libya. In addition, computer records at the Frankfurt airport confirm that the suitcase originated in Malta; the challenge remains to link the suspects to the suitcase. In pursuit of this task, the prosecution is expected to offer eyewitness accounts placing al-Megrahi at Malta's airport purchasing the suitcase.

In its rebuttal, the defense team has concentrated on exposing Bollier's exceptionally defective character, and they have also maintained that radical Palestinian groups, aided by the Stasi (the former East German secret police) and acting on behalf of Iran, actually carried out the bombing. Richard Keen, lawyer for one of the suspects, showed that MEBO supplied approximately fifteen timers to East Germany in 1985 and several more at later dates. "You concealed from the authorities that MEBO had supplied MST timers to the Stasi," defense counsel David Burns pointedly suggested. "That is why you accused Libya, to deflect attention from the PLFP-GC [Popular Liberation Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command]?" The defense failed, however, to counter MEBO co-owner Edward Meister's claim that some of the timers sold to East Germany were different than the ones dispatched to Libya. Moreover, the defense team has thus far failed to prove that the Stasi transferred such sensitive equipment to the Palestinian groups. Paradoxically, the attempt by the defense to tie the Swiss firm to the East German security services seems to have actually validated an aspect of the prosecution's case, confirming that MEBO displayed limited scruples in its client selection.

As to the presence of al-Megrahi in Malta on December 20 and 21, the defense has claimed that many Libyans find Malta a perfect vacation spot. In cross-examining the hotel workers, the defense did elicit the acknowledgment that many Libyans stay at Maltese hotels throughout the year. Still, al-Megrahi's vacation habits seem rather peculiar as he stayed overnight, using a false name and forged travel documents.

The intrigue of the trial was temporarily heightened by the appearance of an alleged Iranian defector, Ahmed Behbahani, who declared that the bombing was a joint operation by Iran and Libya. Behbahani claimed to have directed all of Iran's terrorism operations abroad and to have personally assembled the group responsible for carrying out the Pan Am bombing. The fact that Iran had pledged retaliation for the shooting down of Iranian airliners in 1988 by the United States, and that Libya similarly promised revenge for the 1986 U.S. bombing of Tripoli, gave credence to Behbahani's claim of collusion between the two powers. Once the alleged defector's tales were scrutinized, however, they were effectively undermined. The Central Intelligence Agency immediately challenged Behbahani's story, pointing to his lack of familiarity with Iran's intelligence structure. Although it is possible that Behbahani may at some point have been associated with Iran's vast intelligence apparatus, the contradictions and exaggerations of his account render his attempt to implicate Tehran in the Lockerbie bombing spurious.

What Next? Despite the sensational events of the past month, the Lockerbie trial is likely to generate even more headlines in the coming weeks. The prosecution is expected to introduce its star witness, Abdul Jiacha, a Libyan double agent who worked undercover as an assistant manager for Libyan Arab Airlines in Malta. Jiacha was smuggled out of Malta by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and defected to the United States in 1991. He is not only familiar with the two suspects but is expected to testify about how Libya used the airline's installations in Malta for intelligence purposes and for the storage of explosives. For a trial that has already witnessed its share of intrigue and conspiracy theories, the drama will only intensify when Jiacha takes the stand.

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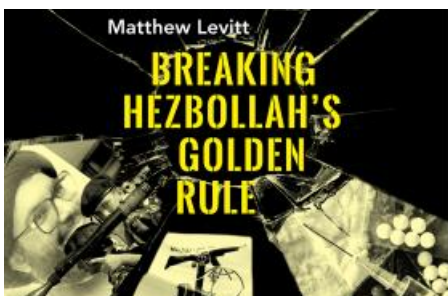
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