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FM AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5185
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1134
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0806
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0575
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
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RHMFISS/CDR USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI 5729

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TRIPOLI 000686

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DEPT FOR NEA/MAG, NEA/PPD, AND EUR/WE

EO 12958 DECL: 8/23/2019
TAGS PREL, PGOV, ASEC, CASC, KMDR, KPAO, UK, LY
SUBJECT: QADHAFI PERSONALLY WELCOMES LOCKERBIE BOMBER

REF: Tripoli 685

TRIPOLI 00000686 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Joan Polaschik, Charge d'Affaires, U.S. Embassy Tripoli, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d) 1. (C) Summary: Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi personally met and welcomed convicted Pan Am 103 bomber Abdel Basset al-Megrahi in the latter's home in Sebha August 21. In press statements, Qadhafi thanked the Scottish government for its "courage and independence" despite "unnecessary and unacceptable pressure," and criticized the reaction of the "other side" as "double standard politics," "encroachment," and "arrogance and contempt." Qadhafi's public, personal involvement will make it extremely difficult for more pragmatic Libyan officials to try to manage the fallout from the mishandling of Megrahi's return. Separately, the UK Ambassador categorically denied Saif al-Islam's claims that the UK agreed to Megrahi's return in exchange for business deals, and said the UK was reconsidering its representation at the 40th anniversary of Qadhafi's coup September 1. End Summary.

MEGRAHI WELCOMED WITH A WARM EMBRACE

2. (SBU) Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi met convicted Pan Am 103 bomber Abdel Bassett al-Megrahi on August 21, in Megrahi's hometown of Sebha. [Note: Qadhafi had traveled to Sebha on August 19 to review some economic projects, and apparently stayed there until the August 21 meeting. End note.] The widely televised meeting, preceded by a warm embrace between Qadhafi and Megrahi, also included several poems expressing congratulations to Qadhafi on the 40th anniversary of the "Great al-Fatah Revolution," on the start of Ramadan,

and for "the return home of brother, Abdel Basset al-Megrahi." Qadhafi delivered remarks to local and international press after his tete-a-tete with Megrahi, which he addressed to "friends" and "those who objected to these friends." Qadhafi thanked the Scottish Government, including the PM and FM, for their "courage," stating that they "have proven to be independent in spite of all unnecessary and unacceptable pressure they faced." He went on to thank his "friend Brown," the British Prime Minister, his government, Queen Elizabeth, and Prince Andrew, who "against all odds encouraged this brave decision." Qadhafi noted that the UK efforts would positively affect "exchange" between the two countries.

3. (SBU) Addressing "the other side," Qadhafi derided comments that the USG had made concerning the sensitivity of Megrahi's release to the families of Lockerbie victims, stating "Are we without feelings, and they have feelings? Are we donkeys and they are humans?" Qadhafi referred to the U.S. opposition to Megrahi's release as "double standard politics," calling it "encroachment" and "arrogance" and "contempt for other nations, their public opinion, and humanity." Qadhafi further stated that the U.S. position was responsible for injustice and terrorism. He said, "Terrorism has its justifications, which is double standard politics."

MEGRAHI'S RELEASE AND UK BUSINESS DEALS

4. (C/NF) On August 20 Qadhafi's son and potential successor to the throne, Saif al-Islam al-Qadhafi issued a statement through his quasi-governmental organization, the Qadhafi International and Charity Foundation, praising his own efforts and success in achieving Megrahi's release from prison. He thanked the Scottish and British governments and stated that the friendship between Libya and both nations would be "forever consolidated." Saif al-Islam went on to address the families of Lockerbie victims, saying that although Megrahi withdrew his appeal, his innocence would one day be proved. During Saif al-Islam's remarks to his new television station "Al Mutawassit" August 20, which were reprinted August 21 in state-owned newspaper "Oya," he linked Megrahi's release to UK business contracts, asserting that Megrahi's case was raised during all negotiations of UK-Libya commercial, oil, and gas deals. Saif al-Islam implied that former UK PM Tony Blair had raised Megrahi with the Libyan leader in connection with lucrative business deals during Blair's 2007 visit to Libya. [Note: Rumors that Blair made linkages between Megrahi's release and trade deals have been longstanding among Embassy contacts. End note.] The UK Ambassador in Tripoli categorically denied the claims during a conversation with the Charge August 21. He also stated that the British government was reconsidering its decision to send Prince Andrew to September 1 events in Libya.

PREPARING FOR A GRANDER AFFAIR?

5. (C) While the Qadhafi family and government officials have not had any public interaction with or comment on Megrahi since the September 21 meeting, banners are being unfurled in Tripoli's Green Square - the site of the upcoming 40th anniversary celebrations - hailing Megrahi's homecoming and the Libyan leader's support of his release. Rumors among Embassy contacts suggest that Megrahi will be honored officially by Qadhafi during the 40th anniversary events. The state-run "Al Watan" website claimed that the Libyan People's Congress would award Megrahi a medal of honor for his "bravery and patience" in turning himself over to the "states of international arrogance" for the sake of his nation.

6. (C) Comment: Qadhafi's personal, warm welcome of Megrahi and strongly worded statement critical of U.S. opposition to Megrahi's release are a powerful indication of the importance that Qadhafi attaches to the issue. Qadhafi likely viewed Megrahi's return as vital to his own domestic politics: a boon to the influential Megrahi tribe and, more importantly, a major victory

for the hardliners who have been critical of his engagement with the West. Qadhafi's very public, personal involvement in this issue will complicate the efforts of pragmatic Libyan officials seeking to manage the fallout from Megrahi's return, as they now have very little political cover to make the case for a muted response. We continue to monitor the situation. End Comment.

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