



[Israel Foreign Minister Discloses Secret Meeting with Libyan Foreign Minister](#)

By Brenna Haggerty

Early this week, news broke that Najla al-Mangoush, Foreign Minister of Libya, had a secret meeting in Rome with her Israeli counterpart, Eli Cohen. Cohen publicly announced what should have been a clandestine meeting, boasting progress towards normalization. Libya denied these claims and asserted that the meeting was unplanned and informal. The backlash was immediate and Prime Minister Abdul Hamid al-Dbeibeh was quick to shift blame and suspend Mangoush, dismissing her only a day later on August 28, 2023. Historically, Libya has been a strong proponent of the Palestinian cause, and while Dbeibeh insists Libya will never recognize Israel, this meeting spurred great unrest in the country. Civilian demonstrations threaten to completely destabilize the already fragile UN-sanctioned government in Tripoli.

Originally, Dbeibeh claimed that he did not know about Mangoush's meeting with Cohen. Now, sources reveal that Dbeibeh approved the meeting a month ago and was briefed directly after it took place. In January of this year, CIA Director Bill Burns visited Dbeibeh to discuss normalization with Israel. He was open to the idea but feared public outcry. Mangoush's dismissal was likely a way to shift the blame and avoid some of the damage to Dbeibeh's reputation. Unfortunately, Cohen's public statement and its fallout have endangered Mangoush, so she has fled to Turkey for her safety.

The United States knew about the meeting and encouraged Libya to attend, expecting it to remain secret. The Biden administration has since expressed its disapproval of Cohen's actions. On top of the recent settlement violence, this has put further strain on Israel's relations with the Biden administration. The administration also voiced concern about the repercussions of this exposure. This will also destroy what little trust was had between the United States and Libyan leaders. This severely limits the Biden administration's ability to be involved in the negotiations.

The largest consequence of this meeting is the political unrest it is causing in Libya. With recent fighting in Tripoli and no stable government since 2011, the country is already in a very precarious position. Introducing yet another destabilizing factor creates unnecessary tension. The unified government under Dbeibeh has lost what little credibility it had and is now incapable of bringing the two separate governments together. There was already doubt surrounding his abilities to do so, but now it is almost certain that he will resign or be removed from office. The United Nations recently stated that they were waiting for a unified government in Libya before holding national elections. The United Nations decided to switch tactics after it became clear that the elections had stalled. Neither party wants to give up the position of power they have had for years. So, the UN decided to wait for unity to ensure all Libyan people had a voice and the proper election legislation could be passed. That plan is no longer viable as the likelihood of state unification is low.

Thus far, the countries that have normalized with Israel have been ignoring public opinion to get close to Washington. These countries are miles away, and the United States shelled out billions of dollars to secure the agreements. Morocco is a prime example of how public opinion and human rights are pushed aside in favor of economic and security-based agreements; Libya was the next target of the Abraham Accords. The United States made a diplomatic error in pushing an unstable country toward normalization. However, the blame also lies with Cohen for revealing the meeting.

With limited information on the meeting itself, it is somewhat difficult to determine the motivations of each actor. There are, however, some theories circulating. The motivation for Israel to go public with the meeting appears to be an independent decision. It was likely an attempt by Cohen to gain diplomatic clout and boast a new accomplishment against the Palestinians. The result instead was a total loss of trust and respect on the global stage. Other countries will be cautious to trust Israel with similar meetings after Cohen's use of poor judgment. Other agreements in the Abraham Accords took years of underground negotiations before going public. Broadcasting this meeting so soon may seriously hinder Israel's progress by deterring other countries from diplomatic talks. Libya's reputation was damaged as well. It appears Dbeibeh agreed to the meeting to gain U.S. support while he struggles to maintain power in Libya. With the United States advocating for him to the United Nations, he would have more security as Prime Minister.

The Israeli-Libyan meeting may have been grounded in both personal interest and strategy, but all parties lost in this scenario. The United States lost any trust it had with Libyan officials and Israel lost its credibility as a diplomatic nation. Libya lost the most from this incident. The people in Libya are suffering due to political instability, the work to unite Libya has been reset, and they, too, seem less credible in the aftermath. If Libya is to have a chance at political progress and fair elections, it needs a new prime minister who can unite the opposition and execute legislative processes.