



Pan Am flight 103: the revelations of former Libyan agent on the Lockerbie bombing

In a series of confessions before US and German investigators, the transcripts of which have been obtained by Mediapart, former Libyan secret services agent Musbah Eter detailed how intelligence chief Abdullah al-Senussi, Muammar Gaddafi's brother-in-law, and his bomb-maker "Masud", planned and carried out a series of bombings in the 1980s, including that which downed a Pan Am Boeing 747 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie in 1988. Eter's statements, given in a series of interrogations between 2013 and 2015, have never before been made public and remained unexploited by prosecution services. That may change ahead of a new trial over the Lockerbie bombing due next year in the US in April. Karl Laske and Vincent Nouzille report.

Karl Laske and Vincent Nouzille - 17 June 2025 à 10h46

"He was the absolute boss of the secret service," said Musbah Eter. "Nothing was ever done without his approval. He knew everything about all operations." During questioning between 2013 and 2015 by US and German investigators, details of which have never before been revealed in public, Eter, a former Libyan secret services agent who in 2001 was sentenced in Germany to 12 years in jail for his part in a 1986 terrorist bombing attack at a discotheque frequented by US military personnel, La Belle, in what was then West Berlin, gave a lengthy account of the role and activities of his former boss, Abdullah al-Senussi, Muammar Gaddafi's brother-in-law who served, over several decades, as the brutal head of the Libyan dictator's intelligence services.

Eter notably told his interrogators the role played by Senussi and other members of the Gaddafi regime's secret services in the planning and execution of the mid-air bombing of a Pan Am Boeng 747 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie on December 21st 1988 which left 270 people dead. He also detailed their part in the mid-air bombing over Niger in September 1989 of a DC-10 operated by French airline UTA, in which 170 people died.

In 1999, Senussi was sentenced *in absentia* to life imprisonment by a Paris court after he was found guilty of being the principal organiser, as head of Libya's then external security organisation, of the bombing of the UTA DC-10, and since that verdict he has been the subject of an international arrest warrant issued by France.

The catalogue of Eter's statements, recorded on almots 70 pages and obtained by Mediapart, were given during five separate sessions of questioning held in Berlin on April 17th 2013, August 20th and 22nd 2014, and October 14th and 15th 2015.

The contents of his statements were to remain unexploited by Western justice systems. Following the fall of the Gaddafi regime in the summer of 2011, some of those who Eter accused of crimes have died, others are on the run, and yet others imprisoned in Libya.



Left to right:: Abdullah al-Senussi, Abu Agila Mohammed Mas'ud Kheir al-Marimi, 74, aka "Masud" the bomb-maker, and former Libyan agent Musbah Eter. Below: the debris of Pan Am flight 103 which was downed over the Scottish town of Lockerbie killing all 259 people onboard and 11 others on the ground. © Photomontage Armel Baudet / Mediapart avec AFP et SIPA

But Eter's statements may now prove decisive in the trial in Washington, recently delayed, of the Gaddafi regime secret services chief bomb-maker, Abu Agila Mohammed Mas'ud Kheir al-Marimi, 74, better known by the names of "Masud" or "Abuagela", accused of building the bomb that ripped apart Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie.

Eter's information also shines more light on the personality of Abdullah al-Senussi, 75. His name featured at the heart of the prosecution case in the trial in Paris earlier this year of Nicolas Sarkozy and several of the former French president's entourage over the alleged funding of his 2007 presidential election campaign by the Gaddafi regime. The prosecution argued that Sarkozy and several of his co-defendants offered to overturn the arrest warrant issued against Senussi after his 1999 conviction in France over the UTA DC-10 bombing, as part of the deal for the Libyan funding.

The court is due to deliver its verdict in the 2007 election funding case in September.

A debriefing meeting on the bombing campaign

Senussi, who has been nicknamed as the "black box" of the Gaddafi regime, is currently held in a detention centre close to Tripoli airport awaiting his appeal to be heard against a conviction over his role in the brutal repression against the 2011 rebellion that finally toppled Gaddafi.

Following the fall of the dictator's regime, Masud was captured by the new Libyan authorities. On September 12th 2012, he confessed to his involvement in the bombings of the discotheque in Berlin and the Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie. After serving ten years in prison in Libya, he was kidnapped from his home in a Tripoli suburb by a Libyan militia and handed over to the US authorities in December 2022, when he was immediately flown to Washington where he was brought before a federal courtroom and charged with two counts of "causing the destruction of an aircraft resulting in death" and one of "destruction of a vehicle [...] by means of an explosive resulting in death". Masud has pleaded "not guilty" to the charges.

The statements he gave in his confession were handed to the FBI in 2017, which subsequently prompted the opening of an investigation. The trial of Masud was due to begin in Washington on May 12th this year, but has now been postponed until April 2026 over considerations of his reportedly poor health and after the prosecution services and the defence team jointly cited the "complex, international nature" and new elements in the case.

In Tripoli, meanwhile, Masud's arrest and future trial has been the subject of protest by those who still hold the Gaddafi regime in esteem. On May 5th, supporters of the Al Ahli Tripoli football club demonstrated with a huge banner with a picture of Masud behind bars along with the phrases "Forgive us Abu" and "Our country has been sold".

Under questioning, Musbah Eter detailed the coordinated nature of the different attacks mounted by the Libyan secret services, and which is confirmed in their retrieved archives and those of Senussi (this was documented by the writers of this report in their book published in France in January, *L'assassin qu'il fallait sauver: Au cœur de l'affaire Sarkozy-Kadhafi*, co-authored with Libyan local politician Samir Shegwara who has researched and revealed documents dating from the Gaddafi regime).

Eter told the US and German investigators that he took part in a meeting of around eight members of Gaddafi's secret services at the end of 1989, which was held to carry out a full debriefing on the major bomb attacks organised by Tripoli. These were the 1986 bombing of the discotheque La Belle in Berlin, the 1988 mid-air bombing of the Boeing 747 over Lockerbie and the 1989 mid-air bombing of the UTA DC-10 over the Sahara in Niger. Eter said both Masud and Senussi were present at the debriefing, held in the latter's office.

"A meeting took place in Senussi's office. Senussi called the meeting," Eter said in his statement. "[...] The meeting was held to evaluate how the attacks were conducted. That is to say, if there were mistakes and did the expected success happen? There was a general consensus of satisfaction regarding the Pan Am attack [...] in this approximately three-hour meeting, all aspects of the three attacks were discussed at great lengths [...] Said Rashid [*editor's note, considered to be one of Senussi's closest assistants*], Abuagela Kher [*aka Masud*] and probably also Sabri Shadi [*an agent close to Senussi*] reported at this meeting about the Pan Am attack. I reported about La Belle with Abuagela Kher. UTA was probably discussed by Hammouda and Abuagela Kher." Hammouda was another close assistant to Senussi.

The existence of the meeting between the principal agents involved in the three attacks had never previously been mentioned.

In another session of questioning, Eter detailed: "Abuagela Masud Kher [*aka Masud*] was questioned on all three attacks. I conclude from that that Abuagela Masud Kher was therefore involved in all three attacks [...] I can't say anything about the other attacks or conversations because the participants engaged in 'attack-related, one-on-one interviews'."

Eter said that after each attack, all the agents and others who took part were supposed to return to Libya as quickly as possible. They were also subsequently prohibited from travelling outside Libya, as a precautionary measure, he added. "Every possible lead to Libya was supposed to be eliminated," he said.

Eter's German lawyer, Andreas Schulz, told Mediapart that the statements are in the hands of the US prosecution services, but declined to comment on the possibility that his client might testify at Masud's trial.

When the bomb-maker used the Berlin embassy kitchen

US filmmaker Ken Dornstein lost his elder brother David in the explosion of the Pan Am Boeing over Lockerbie. As of the fall of the Gaddafi regime, he travelled to Libya to attempt to track down the man accused of organising the bombing (the subject of his film *My Brother's Bomber*, presented in three episodes as of October 2015, and is today [available online at Frontline](#)). After arriving in Libya he visited Senussi's villa, which had been destroyed by a missile, and that of one of the intelligence chief's assistants, where documents could still be found. In the cellars abandoned by Gaddafi's secret services he discovered, and filmed, stocks of cassettes on which were recorded taps made by the regime.

At the end of 2012, Dornstein managed to question Musbah Eter following his release from prison in Germany after serving his sentence over the bombing of La Belle. Eter mentioned the presence in Berlin, before the bombing, of Masud. Dornstein made the connection between Masud and the person present in Malta shortly before the suitcase containing the bomb-primed radio was sent on to Frankfurt from where the Pan Am Boeing was to begin its flight to Detroit via London and New York.

Dornstein told Mediapart that Eter sent him another piece of "crucial" information, which was a photo of Masud, dressed in a prisoner's uniform and appearing before a court in Libya. The filmmaker identified Masud on a video of the triumphant return to Tripoli in 2009 of Libyan intelligence agent Abdulsasset al-Megrahi, the only person ever convicted of the Lockerbie bombing. He was released by the Scottish authorities after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Meeting up again on that occasion, the regime's terrorists congratulated each other.

As of his first interrogation by US and German investigators in 2013, Eter detailed a large panorama of the organisation of Gaddafi's secret services, including the localisation of the buildings used by the external security organisation (ESO), and also Masud's office which was situated close to the Italian embassy in Tripoli, and produced the names of around 20 leading members of the services, along with their photos.

Born in Tripoli in 1957, Eter joined Gaddafi's secret services at a young age. "I started working for the ESO when I was a college student," he said in one of his statements. "Back then I was collecting intelligence undercover. In the years that followed, I was entrusted with various tasks [...]. I was involved in operations abroad." He was sent undercover to Latin America, Britain, Italy, Chad and Tunisia. He was intermittently active in what was then East Berlin from the end of 1985 to March 1988. "I belonged to the department responsible for operations abroad," he said. "It was run by Saïd Rashid."



The scene at the Berlin discotheque La Belle immediately after the bombing on April 7th 1986 which left three people dead and 229 others wounded. © Photo Roland Holschneider / DPA via AFP

Nicknamed "the engineer", Rashid was, in the middle of the 1980s, one of the heads of the Libyan security services, in charge of both eliminating dissidents of the Gaddafi regime and also terrorist projects abroad. "He played a leading role in the La Belle attack," Eter told his interrogators. The Libyan responsibility for the attack on the discotheque, which killed three people and wounded 229 others, many of them Americans, was established in messages between Rashid and Libyan agents present in Berlin which were intercepted by US intelligence from the end of March to the beginning of April 1986. That led to then US president Ronald Reagan's order for a massive air attack on Tripoli and the Libyan town of Benghazi on April 14th that year.

Eter detailed the activities in Berlin of bomb-maker Masud and his assistant. "They both came 1-2 weeks after [*Libyan agent*] Mushah Al-Abini had brought the explosive intended for an attack in Berlin," he told investigators. "It was

brought to the People's Bureau [*editor's note: the Libyan embassy in East Berlin*] as a diplomatic pouch. It was their job to make the explosive capable of being detonated. In addition, Abusgela [*aka Masud*] mixed metal parts into the explosive material."

He said the bomb was then brought "to the embassy's kitchen", where it was explained to Eter "how it was to be handled".

According to Eter, the discotheque was targeted at the last minute.

Revenge for the US raids on Tripoli and Benghazi

Eter told his interrogators that Masud, who had the grade of lieutenant-colonel, was "in charge of the explosives department at the ESO and he also trained ESO members and foreigners in handling explosives [...]. The training typically took place in a large specially secured hall on the grounds of the ESO".

On the involvement of bomb-maker Masud in the other major Libyan terrorist attacks, Eter said: "Abuagela was the technician of this service. So he was the individual that was responsible for the technical preparation of attacks performed by the Libyan Secret Service. This included the attacks [*on*] La Belle, UTA and Pan Am. He was the specialist for explosives. He decided case by case [...] which kind of explosive was to be used. [...]. As far as I know, he was the most qualified expert in the ESO."

Following the April 14th 1986 US bombing of Tripoli, Eter said Saïd Rashid told him "there had to be revenge for the American air raid. In this, there had to be at least double as many casualties".

"There was a general order that stated that the next target of attack would be a Pan Am plane," Eter added. "The order was issued by Saïd Rachid to his people, but there were other groups that had also other targets to be attacked."

Eter detailed that in the hierarchy of the Libyan services, Senussi was above Rashid, and that Senussi was "involved in all operations carried out by Saïd Rashid".

At the beginning of 1988, Eter himself was sent on two reconnaissance missions to the Yugoslave capital Belgrade in view of preparing the bombing of a Pan Am plane. "I informed Rashid that there were hardly any security measures at the airport in Belgrade," said Eter. "Megrahi, who was to conduct the operation, was also present at this discussion."

The suggestion of a bombing mounted from Belgrade is corroborated by documents from the seized archives of Senussi. In the end, the Libyans chose to place a bomb in a suitcase that was sent from Malta to Frankfurt as unaccompanied baggage for Pan Am flight 103.

During his interrogation in 2012 by the new Libyan authorities, Masud confessed to having belonged to then technical department of the ESO, to having manipulated Semtex explosives and to building bombs for the ESO. Asked about the operations he led, he answered these included the Pan Am flight over Lockerbie and La Belle discotheque in Berlin.

Concerning the Pan Am attack, Masud said that after preparing suitcase bombs, he received the order to take one to Malta, where he met up with Abdulbasset al-Megrahi and Lamin Fhimah, a manager for the Libyan Arab Airlines office at Malta's Luqa airport (Fhimah was subsequently tried alongside Megrahi for the Pan Am bombing, but was eventually acquitted for lack of evidence). Masud said he had been ordered to set the timer in the suitcase bomb so that the explosion occurred "exactly 11 hours later". Inside the suitcase, he placed clothing around the bomb-primed radio, and took it himself to Luqa airport where Fhimah registered it at the Libyan Arab Airlines

counter.

That confession by Masud in Libya in 2012 was precise in its detail, but before US justice authorities he has denied his involvement in the Pan Am bombing.

Meanwhile, the statements by Musbah Eter also clarified the role played by Abdulbasset al-Megrahi, who died of cancer in Tripoli in 2012, three years after being released from prison by the Scottish authorities on compassionate grounds. Megrahi repeatedly denied involvement in the bombing and that he had been a member of the ESO. Eter said of Megrahi: "He was responsible for the Libyan Intelligence Service at the airport in Tripoli. It was his job to get weapons, money and members of intelligence service into planes without being checked."

"Al-Megrahi was Abdulla Senussi's secretary," Eter added. "He worked in Senussi's office in Sawani, a part of Tripoli. He was responsible for the Pan Am attack. He told me himself and Saïd Rashid also told me this."

The order to eliminate a mole in Malta

In 1992, after Eter had moved to Malta where he worked as an employee of a company tasked with finding ways around a United Nations embargo against Libya, he and other Libyan agents were given orders to find Abdul Majid Giaka.

The latter, a Libyan national officially employed by Libyan Arab Airlines (LAA) at Malta's Luqa airport, was suspected – and rightly so – of passing on sensitive information to the CIA. The agency had recruited Giaka in the middle of 1988, and over the following months he provided it with information about explosives kept in the LAA offices, and about the comings and goings of Megrahi, Fhimah and Masud.

"We were supposed to collect information regarding Giaka, which we succeeded in doing," eter told the US and German investigators. "[...] We found out where he lived and with whom he met. We were supposed to find him and he was to be liquidated." Giaka had "information about Lockerbie" and "had therefore compromised ESO". However, as part of a US witness protection scheme, Giaka was exfiltrated to the US just in time.

At the time, despite the information passed on by Giaka, the US and Scottish authorities showed no interest in Masud. A former FBI official, whose name is withheld, told Mediapart that it was the documentary made by Ken Dorstein that changed that. Masud was a ghost figure at the time, Dorstein told Mediapart, and no-one had connected the bombing of La Belle with that of Pan Am flight 103.

It was Dorstein who made the connection, more than 20 years after the event, after sifting through judicial archives and those of the former East German secret services, the Stasi. They revealed the number of the passport used by Masud at the time of the Berlin bombing and that he used during his travel to Malta when the suitcase bomb was readied. It was the same: 835004.

- The original French version of this report can be found **here**.

English version by Graham Tearse

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