

Gadaffi's promised land.(The Last Word)(Colonel Gadaffi)

Middle East

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SPEAKING IN LIBYAN ARABIC **RAPHAEL LUZON** insisted that his guests get a second helping of the couscous and lamb stew that his wife cooked for his guests from Libya, Italy, Egypt, Iraq and Tunisia. Except for the menorah on the mantelpiece and the angled mezuzah stuck on the right hand upper corner of the living-room door frame, it was a typical Middle Eastern home with an unmistakably Arabic atmosphere in the heart of London. Mr **Luzon** was delighted by the presence of a Libyan official among his guests, and by a letter on Libyan government headed paper he received from Tripoli expressing the Foreign Ministry's support for the event he had organised earlier that day: the launch of Jews of Libya-UK (JOL-UK), forerunner to an even bigger event organised before Christmas in Rome for the Jews of Libya from across the world, by Rafaello Fellah, another Libyan born Jew. Fellah, is proud of his Libyan ancestry and cherishes a picture of himself with Colonel Muammar Gadaffi published in the Italian press when the Libyan leader declared he was sympathetic to the appeals of Libyan Jews to be recognised as Libyan and to have access to the decrepit synagogues and cemeteries where their relatives are buried. Most have been prevented from returning to their homeland since they were forced to leave in the wake of the Six Day War in 1967. The fight has been a long and hard one but many campaigners believe they have finally glimpsed light at the end of the tunnel.

It would be easy to mistake both **Luzon** and Fellah for a couple of overzealous members of Colonel Gadaffi's "People's Committees", such is their defence of their place of birth and its government's policies. "Yes we are proud of our Jewish faith, but we are Libyan citizens by birth," says **Luzon** whose family lived in Libya for hundreds of years, until they were rounded up in 1967 along with thousands of other Libyan Jews and forcibly deported; each permitted to keep only 20 [pounds sterling]. A Prominent Israeli Knesset Member Moshe Kahlon, a confidant of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, flew to London to attend the conference where he

expressed a wish to become a goodwill ambassador between Israel and Libya and meet with President Gadaffi. Meanwhile, Israeli and Arabic newspapers have reported meetings in Jordan between Libyan officials and Israelis of Libyan extraction to discuss the issue of compensating the exiles for their confiscated property.

Many question Colonel Gadaffi's real motives, and whether this latest idea might go out of fashion like so many before it--although Fellah insists there is an ongoing dialogue with the Libyan leader and his representatives. Others think it is all part of the Libyan charm offensive designed to woo world opinion to look favourably on Libya and its frequently controversial leader.

Diplomats with insider knowledge have suggested Colonel Gadaffi might well offer Libyan Jews compensation for property and assets confiscated, and even invite some, most probably those who moved to Israel, to return to Libya and reclaim their assets. The trade-off, diplomats say, could be a demand for the return of homes and other assets belonging to Palestinians that Libyan Jews who migrated to Israel might have acquired in one way or another from 1948 onward.

If such a deal could be worked out, it would be a miracle short only of parting the sea.

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