

Op-Ed: Why Gadhafi never made it to Englewood

The following op-ed appeared in JTA on January 5, 2010. A version of this piece also ran in The Huffington Post.

By Rep. Steve Rothman (D-NJ)

FAIR LAWN, N.J. (JTA) -- In his JTA article "Gadhafi in my backyard," Rabbi Shmuley Boteach completely misrepresented a situation important to the people of Englewood, N.J., the city where I was born, served as mayor from 1983 to 1989, and now have the honor of representing in Congress.

At issue is a property purchased by the Libyan government nearly 30 years ago, and 17 years before Boteach moved into the neighborhood.

My first involvement in the matter began at the end of November 1982, when I learned that the Libyan government, without my knowledge, or the knowledge of the previous mayor and other city officials, bought a mansion on Englewood's East Hill for its ambassador to the United Nations.

I had just been elected as mayor and was to be sworn in on Jan. 4, 1983. As the new mayor, my main goal was to prevent -- at all costs -- the Libyan dictator Muammar Gadhafi from spending any time in Englewood or, even worse, taking up residence in our community.

Englewood is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic and economically diverse community, just 20 minutes from Manhattan. Questions of nationality, race or religion were and are irrelevant.

The issue was that Libya had been a state sponsor of terrorism with which the United States hadn't had diplomatic relations since 1972, and was run by a madman who I and most believed then, and now, has the blood of innocent Americans and others on his hands. And this was what people were feeling even before the terrible 1988 Lockerbie bombing.

What concerned me most was the potential for violence in my little city of 26,000, with fewer than 80 police officers to handle what could have been deadly confrontations involving thousands of pro- and anti-Gadhafi forces. As you can imagine, there was nearly universal and swift objection to the Libyan government's purchase, from almost everyone in town, from all wards and political parties.

At first we sought to find a way to revoke the sale but were informed that Libya, as a member of the United Nations since 1955, was entitled to domicile its U.N. representative in the New York City area regardless of the current status of its diplomatic relations with the United States. However, a new law enacted by Congress and signed by President Reagan in October 1982 "greatly extended Federal regulations over diplomatic properties."

Known as the Foreign Missions Act, the measure included a requirement that a foreign government give prior notice to the U.S. secretary of state of any intention to purchase U.S. real estate. No such notice had been given.

The law had never been used, so I went to Washington and met with members of the Reagan administration at the State Department to encourage them to use it.

Fortunately, President Reagan's State Department agreed with me that the Foreign Missions Act applied and they entered into a back-channel negotiation with the Libyans. (As noted, the United States had no formal diplomatic relations with the Libyan government at the time.)

This negotiation resulted in an informal understanding that the Englewood property would only be used as the personal residence of the Libyan ambassador to the United Nations and his/her immediate family. Neither Gadhafi nor any other person would be permitted to use the house without the advanced approval of the secretary of state.

The people of Englewood were relieved when they learned of this understanding between the two governments. And as hot issues often do, this one cooled and faded into the background for nearly 27 years. The understanding has been observed by all, without violation -- and without Gadhafi ever setting foot in Englewood.

This past summer, rumors began to spread that Gadhafi was coming to Englewood and taking up residence at the Libyan U.N. ambassador's house in anticipation of the September 2009 opening ceremony of the U.N. General Assembly. A third party directed me to Boteach's column on this subject that had appeared in The Jerusalem Post.

While the rabbi and I had met several times on various occasions, and I was his congressman, he had not called or contacted me, my staff, the U.S. State Department or any other federal official as far as I know to speak of this matter before publishing his Jerusalem Post column.

After I was made aware of Gadhafi's interest in residing in Englewood for the opening of the U.N. General Assembly, and perhaps longer, I immediately contacted the Obama White House, State Department and representatives of the Libyan government in Washington. Over the course of the next six days and nights I was able to persuade the U.S. and Libyan governments to reaffirm, on Aug. 28, 2009, the 1983 understanding between the two countries limiting the use of the Libyans' Englewood property.

That is why Gadhafi never set foot in Englewood in September 2009 when he came to New York City to address the U.N. General Assembly.

In the Aug. 29, 2009 edition of The Huffington Post, Boteach was kind enough to thank me for what he described as my "strong and tireless efforts to keep Gadhafi out of Englewood." I also was very moved when the rabbi reiterated his gratitude to me several more times in public and in private.

However, in his recent JTA column, Boteach was extremely critical of me and all U.S. officials for not evicting the Libyan U.N. ambassador from Englewood, despite the limitations of the law and the fact that the rabbi had purchased his Englewood home in 2000 knowing of the Libyan government's ownership of the 5-acre adjoining property.

Despite monumental steps by the Bush administration to re-establish relations with Libya, Gadhafi is still a madman with the blood of innocent Americans and others on his hands. And we have been able to keep him out of Englewood now for 27 years and counting -- despite his government's ownership of the Englewood property

(Steve Rothman is a Democratic congressman representing New Jersey's 9th District, which includes the city of Englewood.)

Link: <http://www.jta.org/news/article/2010/01/05/1010010/op-ed-why-gadhafi-never-made-it-to-englewood>