

Libya Leads Drive For Euro-Maghreb Unity

On Sept. 25, Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi announced in a front-page interview in the French daily *Le Monde* that "only a confederation of North African (Maghreb) states could definitively settle the western Sahara crisis." In the same interview, Qaddafi also vowed to devote his efforts toward mediating the "conflicts in the Horn of Africa." The reverberations of this statement have already changed the geopolitical structure from Sudan to Morocco, as Arab statesmen have begun to heed Qaddafi's suggestions by rejecting their internecine feuds and adopting a peacemaking perspective of economic development.

The Libyan call for inter-Arab unity echoed through the corridors of Europe where a Franco-Soviet alliance has formed in support of Mediterranean security and economic cooperation. Two interlocking meetings, the Euro-Arab dialogue, held last week in Brussels, and the ongoing Belgrade Conference on Economic Security and Cooperation, devoted agenda priority to the Europeans' role in the economic development of the Maghreb.

Arab Detente through Development

Qaddafi's strategy of combining economic development and personal alliances as a weapon against political conflict has been eminently successful in the case of Tunisia.

In early September, Mohamed Masmoudi, the former Tunisian Foreign Minister who now lives in exile in France, announced that he was returning to Tunisia to complete the unification with Libya that he had masterminded in 1974. He also declared that his activities would be coordinated with Qaddafi for Maghreb unity. Reaction to Masmoudi's proposals caused excitement in the trade-union sector which has been hard-pressed to satisfy the demands of the large number of young unemployed Tunisians, and much consternation to Prime Minister Hedi Nouria, who saw in Masmoudi's return a direct threat to his tenure as leader.

Buffeted by the sentiment for Masmoudi and the economic stagnation in the country, Nouria and aging Tunisian President Bourguiba had no choice but to declare a de facto unification between the two economies. On Oct. 25, the Grand Commission of Tunisian-Libyan cooperation put the finishing touches on an economic development program that will exchange Libyan capital for much needed Tunisian skilled manpower and foster the capital-intensive development of both countries.

A similar Libyan offensive in Sudan is currently underway. According to the Oct. 28 *Journal of Commerce*, "The Sudanese government is prepared to restore diplomatic relations with Libya, which were broken off in July last year after an abortive coup attempt against President Jaafar Numeiry." This announcement was preceded by the unexpected return of muslim religious leader El-Mahdi to the Sudanese political scene. Until two months ago, El-Mahdi, who was accused of plotting with Libya for Numeiry's overthrow, had been living in exile in Libya.

Horn of Africa

This Qaddafi-Mahdi initiative has two immediate repercussions for the volatile Horn of Africa area: first, Soviet influence will be reactivated. El-Mahdi, upon his return, said the Soviets "have a lot to teach us" and "should play an increasingly important role in the Middle East." Secondly, the regime of Anwar Sadat is further weakened by this rapprochement. Anwar Sadat has little maneuverability to conduct a policy of zero growth in the face of a Franco-Soviet alliance in the Middle East and Maghreb. The recent joint parliamentary sessions between Sudan and Egypt, strengthened by the newly-formed Sudan-Libya axis are an indication that a growing consensus for development and cooperation in the area render Sadat's tenure uncertain.

The conflict of the Western Sahara, which has brought Algeria and Morocco to the brink of war, remains the most serious impediment to Maghreb unity. Qaddafi comments, "If the parties concerned maintain their intransigence, it is inevitable that the present confrontations will lead to a war, spilling out into the region."

Qaddafi's call for a Maghreb confederation to settle the Saharan dispute without mention of the renegade Polisario Liberation Movement as party in the issue is similar to the development proposal attributed to Saudi Prince Abdullah — well known for his strong ties to the Moroccan King Hassan II. According to this settlement proposal, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania would engage in joint exploitation of the mineral wealth of the Spanish Sahara. In exchange for their cooperation, by abandoning support for the Polisario, Algerians would be given access rights to the Atlantic Ocean via the Spanish Sahara. Algeria has long desired to utilize this path to the sea to ship the iron ore found in the southwest corner of their country at Tindouf.

In the *Le Monde* interview, Qaddafi announced that he would be making a diplomatic push through Algeria, Mauritania, and Morocco as well as to Spain. As the former colonial power of the Spanish Sahara, Spain has agreed to mediate the dispute. At a meeting of the Spanish Parliament a few weeks ago, the Foreign Minister Ferreira said Spain would use its "good offices" to help in the solution of the conflict.

Euro-Maghreb Deals

The framework for Euro-Maghreb cooperation was outlined at the Belgrade Conference which devoted two days of work to the question of Mediterranean security. One by one, the Arab speakers reiterated the same theme: "The interdependence between Europe and the Mediterranean is such that an armed conflict in the South could plunge the European continent into a new war." According to the Moroccan and Tunisian representatives, the theme of "security and cooperation were as complementary" as the fact that Europe could not accommodate itself to the "insecurity and underdevelopment of its Mediterranean neighbors."

Economic relations between Europe and the Maghreb enjoy longstanding historical precedents which the enemies of growth in the City of London are trying desperately to destroy. Amidst the most profound crisis facing Algerian-European relations, two important energy-related deals have gone through, indicating economic development cannot be shelved through phony liberation movements, such as the Polisario. Last week, Algeria and Italy signed the "contract of the century," according to the *London Financial Times*.

After years of haggling between the three parties concerned, Algeria, Tunisia, and Italy, a contract was finally signed for supplying natural gas to Italy through an elaborate pipeline system, crossing Tunisia, the Mediterranean, Sicily, and finally ending on the Italian mainland. There are reports that the \$13 billion worth of gas might also be piped to other European countries, including France. In addition to this 25-year deal, Algeria, France and Spain have agreed to begin experimental work for another Mediterranean pipeline which will supply natural gas to Spain and finally to France.

The Polisario Ploy

An attempt to jettison French influence in the Maghreb

has been launched by certain forces in the Socialist International and the Algerian government under the aegis of Foreign Minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

The Polisario launched another attack inside Mauritania, taking hostage two French workers employed in the service of the Mauritanian government. French citizens in Mauritania are employed mainly in the iron mining industry. With a total of 13 French hostages, the Polisario is threatening to "try them before a military tribunal" as members of the French intelligence community. The French government has held an emergency session of the cabinet to deal with this crisis, and pressure within France is mounting for the government to take some action against this terrorist threat.

At the meeting of the Socialist International in Madrid Oct 18 an unholy alliance was struck between Algerian representatives and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party of Felipe Gonzales. Gonzales, a personal friend of French Socialist Francois Mitterrand, intervened during the proceedings to demand that the Polisario be recognized as the sole representative of the Saharan people.