

# Can a conflict in the Maghreb be avoided?

by Thierry Lalevée

A regional conflict involving Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania was narrowly avoided, when on May 4, Saudi Arabian King Fahd succeeded in organizing a summit between Algeria's President Chadli Bendjedid and Morocco's King Hassan. Relations are so tense between the two leaders, who had not met since 1983, that they decided to meet right on the border. In a kind of medieval ceremony, each camped his tent on his own territory, and the meeting was held in the tent of King Fahd, straddling the border line. Although planned to last up to 48 hours, the summit was concluded in less than 6 hours. It had been a dialogue of the deaf.

Most immediately, the momentum for war stems from the 11-year-long guerrilla warfare waged by the Algerian-backed Polisario Front, which claims part of Morocco's Saharan desert, decolonized by Spain in 1975. By late April, Morocco completed the construction of its sixth Saharan wall, which seals off its territory from direct guerrilla attacks. It also cuts off the Polisario from any direct access to the Atlantic coast, except by violating Mauritanian territory. The Mauritians have already warned Algiers of the consequences of such an incursion. Though Libya has been the main financial and military supporter of the Polisario Front for years, even during the two years of its friendship treaty with Morocco, still the Polisario maintains its main headquarters in the southern Algerian city of Tindouf.

While the danger of a larger conflict has loomed many times in the last 11 years, last-minute intervention by mediators, especially Saudi Arabia, prevented an explosion. It was for that purpose that King Fahd embarked in March on a Maghreb tour. During his visit to Algiers on March 11, he began planning the Algerian-Moroccan summit. As an enticement, he ordered the creation at the beginning of April of a new Algerian-Saudi bank, with \$300 million in assets, aimed at fostering Algerian agriculture. The Saudi rationale was simple: By helping President Chadli to solve his most immediate economic problems, it could give him enough leverage to impose on his domestic hardliners a compromise with Morocco, avoiding the temptation of using a regional crisis to divert from internal social problems.

This strategy did not take into account, however, the broader aspect of the conflict. Intelligence sources report that

while Algeria has been using the Polisario against Morocco, in their permanent competition for leadership of the region, Moroccan intelligence officers have met the challenge by playing on Algerian separatist tendencies among the Kabyle/Berber community. This was easier during the alliance between Morocco and Libya, since Libya always maintained close ties to the Algerian opposition, represented by the fundamentalist Ahmed Ben Bella and Kabyle leader Ait Ahmed.

## The Soviet gameplan

Meanwhile, Moscow was manipulating both sides in the regional dirty game. In the last year, Moscow has been systematically using the destabilization operations against Algeria by Libya, to strengthen the hardliners within Algeria. It has been an easy game for Soviet intelligence agents to provide these hardliners with reports indicating how the Moroccans, not the Libyans, were behind Algeria's troubles. The crisis erupted last November, when for 24 hours, a revolt of workers and students took place in Setif and Constantine. The pretext was Algeria's economic crisis. The revolt was organized by pro-Soviet elements within the ruling Politburo, and was run by Soviet-trained Algerian students, to discredit as "soft," some of Chadli's pro-Western advisers such as Gen. Mustafa Benloucif, who was forced to resign and was replaced by Gen. Abdallah Belkouchet, an officer from the period of President Boumedienne.

Moscow has scored many victories in recent weeks, as there have been several exchanges of high-level Soviet and Algerian delegations. On April 11, the Soviet deputy defense minister and commander-in-chief of the Air Force, Marshal A. Yefimov, began a visit to Algeria. On April 13, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Yuli Vorontsov arrived for a 24-hour visit in Algiers. At the same time, Algeria's interior minister was being sent to the Soviet Union for a tour, and on April 21, the secretary general of the defense ministry, General Chelloufi, was arriving in Moscow with a large delegation. Military ties are being strengthened between the two countries, and a \$1 billion military deal was initiated, primarily concerning the Air Force. Algeria was told to prepare for war.

Meanwhile, on April 30, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze was meeting in Moscow with Moroccan Foreign Minister Abdel Latif Filali, to discuss Gorbachov's proposal to make the Mediterranean "a lake of peace and cooperation." This also followed the exchange of several, primarily cultural, delegations between the two countries, since the beginning of the year.

The Soviet leaders apparently consider that a Maghreb conflict now could have beneficial consequences in undermining the Southern Flank of NATO, in parallel to operations being run against Turkey. Furthermore, because they have ties to all sides, a conflict would institutionalize the Soviet regional role as "peacemaker," as has already been done in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf regions.