

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Maghreb unity by 1992, too?

The show of unity of the North African nations, at the June 10 Arab summit, might just be for real.

Though the just-concluded Arab summit in Algiers was officially dedicated to discussing the revolt in the Israeli-occupied territories, a new display of Maghreb unity among Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania was as much the real focus. For the record, this was ceremoniously photographed on June 10 in a family scene uniting Algeria's President Chadli Benjedid, Morocco's King Hassan, Tunisia's President Ben Ali, Mauritania's President Ould Daya, and Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, clad in an aviator suit zipped from top to bottom and shiny white boots. This ended with mutual embraces, including between Colonel Qaddafi and King Hassan, whose appropriate comment was "Inch'allah, here we go again."

Despite Qaddafi's antics at the Arab summit—such as wearing white gloves, not to touch the skin of "leaders who have blood on their hands"—diplomats from the Maghreb are voicing confidence that the sudden unity is here to stay. What makes it different from previous, failed attempts, is that it is not the product of wild political dreams, such as Qaddafi's many efforts to "merge" nations which are so different from each other, but is the outgrowth of necessity. Above the political propaganda, the day-to-day economic crisis of the entire region has forced these countries to draw closer. Economic pressures also mean that no country can claim political and economic hegemony over the others.

One of the first signs of actual reconciliation between Algeria and Morocco occurred two months ago, around the locust plague. Faced with

an outside threat which could not be blamed on the other, they set up joint committees. In a matter of days, as the locusts moved from the Sahel region into Mauritania and began endangering Moroccan and Algerian farming, a first committee was created at their common borders to ensure that the locusts would not benefit from regional political disunity. Though these committees were not able to eradicate the locusts, they were able to contain the threat.

A key aspect of this reconciliation will be the ability of Algeria—whose economy has taken a beating from fluctuating oil prices—to tap the Moroccan agricultural market. The same is true between Tunisia and Libya. Qaddafi has not changed, but he has been forced to reset his priorities, mainly because of Libya's flagging economy. Reversing several years of "state-run economy," Qaddafi has had to authorize the opening of privately owned shops to quell discontent.

The re-opening of the borders with Tunisia was also needed, to let Libyans buy in Tunisia what they can't get at home. In return, Libya will compensate Tunisia for the seizure of the assets of Tunisian workers in 1985. After nearly a decade's dispute, several weeks ago Libya agreed to jointly develop the oilfields in the continental shelf between the Tunisian Gulf of Gabes and Libya's Sirte. Local sources expect that during the first official visit of President Ben Ali to Tripoli in late June, Qaddafi may make the gesture of offering Tunisia the income of the oilfields—some \$950 million.

Saudi Arabia has reportedly prom-

ised to put together a special three-year investment plan for the Maghreb nations, aimed at alleviating their debt burden. Both Tunisia and Morocco have been involved in bitter fights with the International Monetary Fund over their external debts.

Ultimately, the leaders of the Maghreb envisage a target date of 1992. They believe that the process of European Unity to be implemented then, should be complemented by a similar unity in the Maghreb region. They also hope that by then, the Maghreb, which is already tied to Europe through bilateral and multilateral trade agreements, could become Europe's privileged partner and sell its farm and other products at competitive prices, comparable to the treaties Israel has with the European Community.

Many disputed issues persist. Between Algeria and Morocco, there is the unresolved question of the Polisario "liberation fighters" of the Western Sahara. The two countries' foreign ministers will meet in Saudi Arabia in early July to attempt the first talks. Moroccan diplomats, who saw Polisario ordered by Algeria to withdraw to its rear bases, are waiting for the weeks following the Arab summit, to see if it was just a move aimed at smoothing the summit or whether it really reflects a policy change in Algeria. Between Tunisia and Libya is the question of thousands of Tunisians still being trained in Libya's military camps.

Between all those countries and Libya, is the Egypt issue. Algeria is expected to resume diplomatic relations with Egypt very soon. Libya was very vocal at the Arab summit in opposing Egypt's reintegration into the Arab League. How long can Morocco, Tunisia, and potentially Algeria keep diplomatic relations with Egypt, without confronting Libya about it?