

Morocco sponsors a peace initiative

by Thierry Lalevée

The kingdom of Morocco was the scene of a dramatic event on May 14-15 that may transform politics in the Middle East and Africa.

Forty Israelis, including nine parliamentarians representing a range of political parties, attended a public event in Morocco for the first time. Under the personal sponsorship of King Hassan, an international conference of the Council of the Moroccan Jewish Communities was held. Attendees at the event, both Israeli and Moroccan, made it clear that the participation of the Israelis in such a public way could create the conditions for Morocco to play a role as mediator between Israel and the Arab countries.

King Hassan, according to Moroccan insiders, is known to be apprehensive about the lack of substance of U.S. policy toward the Middle East and Africa, and is intent on sending a message to Washington that he is prepared to prevent his nation and region from sinking into chaos or being absorbed into the Soviet Empire.

The conference took place against the backdrop of a worsening threat to all the North African countries from Colonel Qaddafi's Libya. Intelligence officials are certain that Qaddafi is on the brink of a military move against his neighbor Tunisia, and has mounted a growing threat to Morocco and to Egypt.

The openings between Israel and Morocco could have two potential effects. First, the pro-Western nations of North Africa could find a *modus vivendi* with Israel on the basis of containing the Qaddafi menace. Second, Morocco, Egypt, and Israel might find opportunities for working in conjunction or in parallel to develop Africa—especially if the United States and leading European countries like France abandon their current benign, or malignant, neglect toward the Third World.

On May 17, U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger arrived in Rabat for meetings of the U.S.-Morocco Mixed Commission. The next day, he met King Hassan, and will deliver a personal message from Hassan to Ronald Reagan.

Among the Israelis visiting Morocco were Yossi Sarid and Rafi Edry of the Labour Party, Meir Shitrit of the Likud Party, Aharon Abuhatzera of the Tami Party, and Hannah Zemer, editor of the trade-union newspaper *Davar*. Edry invited King Hassan to visit Israel; that invitation was neither accepted nor rejected, but Minister of State Ahmad Awali did accept, and announced that Morocco would establish an

“Association for Jewish-Arab Understanding.” A newspaper he owns, *Le Matin de Sahara*, published a May 13 editorial entitled, “Jewish-Arab Agreement, the Moroccan Example.” A top representative of the Moroccan Jewish community, David Amar, said that Morocco must play the role of mediator between Israel and the Arab states.

According to Moroccan sources, the meeting, which was the annual conference of Moroccan Jews, a 16,000-strong community, was carefully prepared to be a spectacular event re-launching the peace momentum in the Middle East. “We wanted to make clear that the resolutions of the Fez Islamic conference were not empty words, but that we meant it when we said that we accepted Israel's right to exist and that we were ready to negotiate,” said one source. Giving weight to the initiative is the fact that King Hassan is the current chairman of the Organization of Islamic Countries and for several years has chaired the Jerusalem Committee of the same organization.

‘Judeo-Arab dialogue’

The conference was held under the spiritual sponsorship of 12th-century Jewish philosopher Maimonides, an adviser to the Cairo Caliph of the time. It was concluded by the creation of the “Association of the Sons of Abraham for a Judeo-Arab dialogue.” Sponsored by the Moroccan monarchy, the new association includes as founding members the leaders of the Moroccan Jewish community, members of the Moroccan Jewish group “Identity and Dialogue” of France, and the 40 Israelis present at the conference. The new association will sponsor commemorations of the 850th anniversary of Maimonides' birth next year in Fez as an example of Judeo-Muslim collaboration.

The ball is now in the Israeli camp, but also in the American camp, despite President Reagan's obvious decision not to deal with Mideast problems until after November. King Hassan has been carefully silent, waiting for reactions. Before the conference, PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Jordan had been consulted; Kuwait and Saudi Arabia said they had not given their agreement to such a conference.

More interesting is the fact that only Syria and a few Palestinian radical groups based in Damascus have come out strongly against King Hassan, urging the Arab league to pass sanctions against Morocco, as was done against Egypt. Qaddafi has not yet uttered a word. Arab League sources stressed that nothing relating to possible sanctions would be decided at the next meeting on May 19.

Banner headlines in Israel welcomed the conference and Israeli Knesset members in Morocco made it clear that they considered that King Hassan “could play a very important role for peace,” in the words of Yossi Sarid. From Cairo, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Butros Ghali praised the conference as a confirmation of Egypt's “right choice of peace with Israel” as he called for a new Arab League which would recognize Israel.