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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

27 June 1986

North Africa: The Power Equation



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Summary

The two major alliances of North Africa are undergoing internal strains which could lead to a shift in the balance of power in the Maghreb. Morocco's King Hassan and Libyan leader Qadhafi are increasingly dissatisfied with the implementation of their union; longstanding differences among Algeria, Tunisia, and Mauritania have prevented their loose pact from taking root. We do not anticipate a dissolution of the current groupings in the near term, but friction, if unchecked, could lead the countries to realign their foreign policies. The most likely change would involve a rapprochement between Algeria and Libya, and that these two states would benefit the most from such a shift. Morocco and Tunisia would be more isolated and vulnerable. Overall, the balance of power in the Maghreb would not change appreciably under this scenario, unless in the unlikely event that Algeria and Libya form some sort of an alliance. Such shifts in the region would provide opportunities for Moscow to expand its influence and produce mixed results for Washington.



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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Maghreb Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 27 June was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be directed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, [redacted].

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Background

Since late 1984, the two North African groupings -- the Arab-African Union of Morocco and Libya and the loose coalition of Algeria, Tunisia, and Mauritania have sparred for advantages. Both alliances are built on the sand of profound differences and old rivalries between partners. Historically, Morocco's King Hassan and Tunisia's President Bourguiba have been strongly oriented toward the West, while Algeria and Libya have been among the foremost proponents of radical socialism in the Third World and have had fairly close ties with Moscow in recent years. [redacted]

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Fissures in the Alliances

During 1986 there have been indications of tensions within these two alliances. Libyan leader Qadhafi is disappointed with his union with Morocco, even though it is a gambit that so far has entailed few costs for him. Qadhafi is particularly frustrated with Morocco's reluctance to cooperate on defense as called for in the treaty establishing the union, and by Rabat's refusal to provide embargoed spare parts for Libya's inventory of US-manufactured aircraft. [redacted]

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Morocco, which has more to lose in the relationship, also is dissatisfied with the union. Hassan realizes that the union has damaged Morocco's ties with Washington [redacted]

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[redacted] He also has inadvertently aided Algeria's efforts to draw closer to the US. Moreover, Hassan almost certainly is aware that the union has resulted in a sizable influx of Libyans into Morocco, which increases the potential for Qadhafi to create trouble for Hassan, especially if the union fails. [redacted]

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Libya's military threats against Tunisia during the past year have given impetus to cooperation between Algeria and Tunisia. Even so, Tunisian leaders are uncomfortable with the newfound relationship. They worry about becoming militarily dependent on Algiers and have longstanding suspicions that Algiers sees Tunisia as part of Algeria's sphere of influence, according to Embassy Tunis. Unlike the other countries, Algerian leaders have less scruples about their alliances and the effects on the country's overall foreign policy, but they fear that these commitments risk war with Libya and Morocco. [redacted]

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Shifting Coalitions

The members of these alliances have begun to take steps to compensate for recent strains with their partners. Since November, Libya has undertaken a diplomatic offensive to improve relations with Algiers. Qadhafi traveled to Algeria in late January for a meeting with President Bendjedid, and since then the two sides have had several high-level contacts between political, economic, and military delegations. Algeria and Libya, for example, signed a comprehensive economic cooperation agreement in late February, and a visit to Tripoli in March by the Algerian Prime Minister produced a protocol in which both sides called for achievement of a union as a prelude to unity in the Maghreb. Algeria, like Morocco, supported Libya in the aftermath of the US airstrikes in March and April, but did not directly criticize the US for its actions. [redacted]

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Qadhafi probably wants to gain a measure of security in light of his confrontation with the US and break up nascent Algerian cooperation with Egypt and the US. He also wants to lessen tension with Algeria arising from conflicting claims over the border. An accommodation with Algeria would better allow him to meddle in Chad and elsewhere in the region. [redacted]

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Algeria remains highly skeptical of Qadhafi's motives, but President Bendjedid appears to believe that the possible advantages of expanded contacts outweigh the risks. Algeria wants to blunt Libyan subversion in Tunisia and Chad and pressure Qadhafi to cease his support for Algerian dissidents. Both Algeria and Libya have found common cause in OPEC over policy toward oil prices, and Algerian leaders would want to gain renewed Libyan support for the Polisario guerrillas battling Morocco for control of the Western Sahara. Reports from the US Embassy in Tunis indicating that Algeria was encouraging Tunis to adopt a less confrontational posture toward Libya suggest Bendjedid could use Tunisia as a pawn to placate Libya. [redacted]

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Morocco generally has looked outside the Maghreb to make up for its isolation in North Africa. Hassan probably believes that he has little choice as long as he continues his union with Qadhafi. [redacted]

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[Redacted]

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Tunisia, more than the other countries, is militarily vulnerable. Bourguiba's primary concern has been stability in the face of Libyan blandishments and doubts about French and American willingness to come to his defense. Even so, Tunisia remains wary of Algeria, and has looked outside the region to Egypt and Iraq for military support. President Bourguiba, however, has little choice but to rely on US military support to bolster national defense. [Redacted]

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Regional Prospects

Neither of the two North African alliances is in imminent danger of collapse, despite the strains. Both Hassan and Qadhafi view the Moroccan-Libyan union as a "marriage of convenience" that serves useful purposes despite the limited progress in political cooperation. Algeria and Tunisia will find it necessary to maintain their close ties, as long as the Rabat-Tripoli alliance endures, and the threat exists of Libyan interference in Tunisian succession politics. [Redacted]

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Nevertheless, we believe the Maghreb countries would not be reluctant to realign their foreign political relations if current frictions intensify over the next year. [Redacted]

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Winners

Algeria and Libya would be the most likely countries in the region to change partners and negotiate a practical compromise with each other. They also would be the primary beneficiaries of any shift in the existing alliances. Reconciliation would serve to lessen the military threats each faces from abroad. Both countries are surrounded by hostile neighbors, and each would be able to reorient its forces toward its traditional enemies. Libya would be able to strengthen its border with Egypt, while Algeria would be able to refocus its attention on Morocco. [Redacted]

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In our judgment, any Libyan-Algerian rapprochement would be no more advanced than a fairly loose association because of competition for regional dominance. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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Losers

Morocco and Tunisia would find themselves more vulnerable if the current alliances were to shift, especially because of their weaker military position and economic problems. They would be without any partners in North Africa, or be thrown together in a weak coalition.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

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The loss of Algeria as a key ally would be a blow for Tunisia, since the country's leaders have leaned on Algeria in the wake of disillusionment with France and the US over what Tunisian leaders perceive as parsimonious security assistance of late. Both Tunisia and Morocco would be prone to Libyan subversion.

[Redacted]

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Morocco almost certainly would be compelled to break ranks with Libya if the Algerian-Libyan rapprochement showed promise. The union might also split if Hassan became convinced that Qadhafi had resumed military aid to the Polisario or was engaged in subversive activity in Morocco. In these circumstances, Hassan could turn to Tunisia, even though he would know that his new partner would not be able to render the strategic and economic assistance Morocco needs. Tunisia might reciprocate a Moroccan overture, but its leaders, too, would see limited advantages to such a relationship. A more likely course for Morocco and Tunisia would be concerted efforts to obtain assistance from the US, France, wealthy Arab states, or even the Soviet Union if the US was not receptive to their needs.

[Redacted]

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The New Balance of Power

We believe that a realignment of states in North Africa would not significantly alter the balance of power or stability in the region. Morocco and Algeria will continue to be adversaries and will remain at loggerheads over the Western Sahara. The position of Libya vis-a-vis the other Maghreb states would be somewhat improved, because Algiers is the only regime that can effectively challenge Tripoli.

[Redacted]

Overall military stability, at least in the short term, would be enhanced by an accommodation by Algeria and Libya, which have the largest and most lethal inventories of weapons. Thus while the prospects of military conflict in the Maghreb may recede with a change in the alliances, heightened

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[redacted]

anxieties on the part of Morocco and Tunisia would continue to keep the region on edge. [redacted]

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The emergence of a formal political alliance between Algeria and Libya would produce a significant change in the balance of power in the Maghreb. Even cooperation short of a compact between them, such as support for the Polisario and Moroccan dissidents, would result in significantly heightened friction in the region. The war in the Western Sahara would be prolonged and state-sponsored terrorism would increase. Qadhafi, for his part, would be careful not to antagonize the Algerians with overt attacks on Tunisia, but he probably would adopt a more aggressive stance toward Egypt. [redacted]

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The Soviet Angle

Such shifts in the alliances probably would encourage Libya and Algeria to look to the Soviet Union as a potential wedge against the others. High level contacts between the Soviets and Algeria and Tunisia suggest that Moscow senses an opportunity to increase its influence in the region. Moscow favors a rapprochement between Algeria and Libya, because of the Soviet's traditional friendship with these two countries. [redacted]

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None of the Maghreb countries, except for Qadhafi's Libya, are prepared to jeopardize their security links with Western Europe or the United States. Tunisia probably hopes its contacts with the Soviets will prompt the US to increase its aid, and Algiers and Rabat could do the same. These three countries also probably hope to get Moscow to curb Qadhafi's excesses. [redacted]

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Implications for the United States


These shifts in relations among the Maghreb states would have mixed results for Washington, but, overall, it is conceivable that the United States would lose influence in North Africa. Morocco and Tunisia would move closer to Washington out of necessity. Both countries would view Washington as the best source of military assistance. Nevertheless, the United States would not necessarily have greater leverage, because Rabat and Tunis would probably conclude that Washington would be more dependent upon them. The degree to which Rabat and Tunis turned to Washington probably would depend on the nature of the Algerian-Libyan relationship. The closer the ties between Algiers and Tripoli -- particularly any hint of military cooperation -- the more willing Morocco and Tunisia would be to cooperate with the United States, or even discuss US access to military facilities. [redacted]

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Bilateral relations with Algeria probably would become more ambivalent. Algeria presumably would want to continue to expand ties with the United States in order to modernize its economy and military. To the extent that Algiers felt compelled to placate Qadhafi, however, it would have less incentive to cooperate with Washington. Algeria may even decide to refrain from acting as a political conduit to radical Arab regimes. Qadhafi, for his part, would eliminate the military threat from Algeria and coopt a key ally of Washington in the US effort to undermine the Libyan regime. 

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