

What outcome for the Maghreb crisis?

by Thierry Lalevée

In one of his latest rantings, Libya's Muammar Qaddafi announced on Aug. 28: "I will use force to achieve Arab unity." Libya, he said, was committed to "abolishing borders which have been established by the colonial powers."

Libya's commitment to its version of Arab unity is certainly not new. Nor is it new that Libya is committed to using force in pursuit of a political goal which has grown out of the geopolitical fantasies of the ruling Senussi Sufi Brotherhood for an "Islamic Sahel Caliphate," backed by the military might of the Soviet Union.

Whether such a dream ever comes to fruition, will be very concretely decided according to the outcome of the ongoing Tunisia-Libya crisis, featuring Qaddafi's threat to invade his neighbor. Begun in early August with a deliberate Libyan provocation, the crisis is far from settled. At its roots has been the indecisiveness of most of the Western countries ostensibly opposed to Qaddafi's terrorist regime.

While the Tunisian government stood firm, and deployed its own military forces at the borders when, on Aug. 23, Libya began massing some 25,000 troops there, such firmness found little echo internationally. Indeed, as Tunis demanded that the expulsion of its workers be halted, that their wages and savings, which had been expropriated in Tripoli, be returned, and that Libyan troops be withdrawn, it confronted only a new escalation from Libya.

On Aug. 24, Libyan jet fighters systematically violated Tunisian airspace. A day later, the Libyan navy was deployed in international waters opposite the Tunisian cities of Sfax and Monastir, sending flares up all night, as if toying with the idea of a naval bombardment.

The United States stated that its Sixth Fleet based in Naples would be deployed in the Gulf of Sirte to "show the flag" and indicate to the Libyans the price it would have to pay should it violate Tunisian sovereignty—but this assurance was only verbal. Granted, the U.S. administration intervened on two occasions on Aug. 26 and 27 to state that the "pledge given by the United States to President Bourguiba" during his last visit to Washington would be fully implemented should Libya act. The political commitment was important, but somehow left the impression that Washington was in no hurry to be implicated in a crisis with Libya's madman.

Libya itself had made no secret that it wanted a confrontation with the Americans: "Get the Americans involved.

That will be more interesting," said a spokesman of the Libyan foreign ministry to the Tunisian ambassador on Aug. 22.

As for Paris, on Aug. 25, the new French ambassador, Eric Rouleau, conveyed to Tunisian Prime Minister Mohammed M'zali that "France is standing by Tunisia." But the French ambassador to Tripoli told the Libyan authorities the following day: "Paris has given no guarantee to Tunis whatsoever." The Quai d'Orsay then made matters worse by refusing to clarify.

The only real and solid deterrent to Libya emerged from Algeria. Since May 1983, Algeria and Tunisia have had a friendship treaty which, although containing no military clause per se, stipulates that whenever the sovereignty of one is endangered, the other will come to its aid. A full activation of that clause was discussed during the weekend of Aug. 25 between Tunisian Foreign Minister Caid Essbi and Algerian President Chadli Benjedid.

Hence, the immediate Tunisian backdown Qaddafi had hoped for was not forthcoming. Instead, stronger ties developed between Tunisia and Algeria, and extended to Mali and Niger, both affected by the expulsion of foreign workers from Libya. The threat loomed that such ties could also be extended to Cairo, which, despite its exclusion from the Arab League, was bound to become involved.

Another annoying fact for the colonel was the visible change emerging in Morocco, with which Libya only a year ago signed a "Treaty of Unity." Moroccan officials seem to have realized that just as they had used Libya to neutralize the Polisario rebels in the Western Sahara, Tripoli was using the same relationship to neutralize Rabat diplomatically, giving Qaddafi a freer hand for destabilization of the entire Maghreb. So, Morocco proposed that it mediate in the conflict with Tunisia—hardly the behavior of a country "united" to Libya.

Libya may thus be militarily checked, but is not the end of the crisis, as observers have remarked.

First, Tunisia is facing the problem of re-integrating into its economy some 25,000 jobless workers expelled from Libya without papers or money. The potential for unrest is incalculable. Second, countries like Mali and Niger face yet deeper problems of drought and famine. Third, Libya is making no secret that, with aid of its North Korean and East German technicians, it is preparing another adventure into Chad, parallel with its consolidation of a pro-Libyan coup in Sudan—hence, the encirclement of Egypt.

Few doubt that Libyan thrusts into the Central African Republic, Zaire, and ultimately Nigeria—the major prize—would follow.

These are reasons enough to give more forceful backing to the regional resistance to Qaddafi, without forgetting that Libya does have economic problems. The international economic boycott demanded by the Egyptian foreign minister on Aug. 26 seems to be the most natural step for the United States to take.