

## North Africa: more chaos yet to come

by Thierry Lalevée

The visit to North Africa of U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead may have achieved many things, but certainly not clarification of America's policy toward the region. True, the diplomatic and political crises, especially between the United States and Tunisia, and the United States and Egypt, may have cooled down with less virulent and less public demonstrations of official anger at Washington. But this chapter of the crisis is not closed; rather, all decided to adopt a "wait and see" policy, in particular for more "concrete indications" from America, according to Tunisian officials.

Whitehead's visit to Tunisia, the final leg of his three-nation tour after Italy and Egypt, ended in confusion. Whitehead was said to have received in Tunis an even cooler reception than in Cairo. A day before his arrival, Mahmoud Mestiri of the foreign ministry announced that there was a "deep crisis" between Tunis and Washington. Tunisian officials refused to publicly acknowledge Whitehead's arrival under the pretext it could "lead to public outrage," and, at the end, refused to have a joint communiqué. So Whitehead made a unilateral statement stressing that Israel's raid "surprised and shocked Americans as much as it did Tunisians," and that the United States "deplored [it] as much as any act of international terrorism." The State Department in Washington immediately clarified that Whitehead didn't mean that "the Israeli raid was an act of terrorism."

For public consumption, such a declaration was seen as an apology to Tunisia for Israel's raid. Tunisians and others put on a face of being pleased, especially since the Israeli foreign ministry appeared angered. But no one is satisfied. It is so far from Reagan's previously announced position, and his famous "never" when asked about a public apology to Egypt, that Arab leaders could only wonder: Can it be that what Reagan says can be so easily undermined by a mere deputy secretary? Or was the statement merely *pro forma*, aimed at appeasing them, but reflecting no real policy change? Considering Whitehead's career with Goldman Sachs investment firm and longstanding ties to Kissinger and the Trilateral Commission, the answer is not easy. If one of Whitehead's aims, because of his connections, was to spread misgivings toward the administration, then he succeeded.

Sent by Shultz, Whitehead aimed at luring his interlocutors into a sense of confidence, away from the reality of State Department's official policy. He told reporters in Cairo that there was a better understanding between the countries—an outright lie as Whitehead's associates are busy undermining President Mubarak's regime. Henry Precht, the former director of the Iran desk of the State Department under Carter and first secretary in Cairo up to several months ago, recently praised the Marxist opposition to Mubarak as being "better economists" than those in the government. Precht is no Marxist, but has advocated opening an official dialogue with the same parties that have been organizing day after day of anti-American demonstrations in Cairo.

As most observers noted, the demonstrations are not really anti-American; they are primarily anti-Mubarak! Calling the game was an Oct. 21 article of the *Financial Times*, which commented, "Mubarak may not be up to the job of President," stressing that Egypt needs a strong man. The *Financial Times* made no bones of the fact that this had to be Marshal Abu Ghazala, the defense minister who has been eyeing Mubarak's job since 1981. Indeed, Ghazala, who considers himself a great strategist and geopolitician, would not be bothered about the role of Egypt within the Non-Aligned movement or keeping the country independent—as Mubarak is. As Precht knows, Ghazala and the Marxist opposition won't go together, but a Marxist-sponsored revolt will be the long-expected pretext for a military coup, against a weakened Mubarak.

Mubarak's knowledge of such plots was negatively made known on Oct. 20 when, instead of attacking Abu Ghazala for his role in the intercept of the Egyptian plane, he decided to blame Tunisia. Mubarak was reacting to provocative articles in the American press gloating over the fact that U.S. intelligence had known better than Mubarak, because Egypt was riddled with American agents. Between the lines, the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* were saying that Cairo is an American colony.

Such articles aimed at pushing Mubarak into a corner and discrediting him. The choice was either to angrily react and expel dozens, perhaps hundreds of Americans, inflicting unthinkable damage on relations between the two countries; to deny everything; or to go at the roots—the double game played by some Americans and some Egyptians. Mubarak chose not to deny but to make Tunisia the culprit, on the basis of fabricated information by an old Sadat intelligence network. This was a way of avoiding what will become in coming weeks a showdown with those who want to overthrow him.

In late September, a broad alliance between Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt was consolidating against Libya. This has been shattered. Shattered also has been the trust between the PLO and Jordan, and between the PLO, Tunisia, and Egypt. Expectedly, Jordan has intensified its negotiations with its former arch-enemy Syria which, alone, stands unblemished from this entire crisis.