

## New Move To Unite Tunisia With Libya

As part of their overall Middle East peace offensive, French and Arab political networks are working to settle longstanding disputes in North Africa — an area which has often been used by the U.S. to foment inter-Arab friction.

Mohammed Masmoudi, the Gaullist-linked former Tunisian Foreign Minister, announced Sept. 8 that he was preparing to return to Tunisia from self-imposed exile in France in the coming weeks. In an exclusive interview which appeared in the French daily *Le Monde* Sept. 10, Masmoudi declared that he was returning “not to retire but to succeed in what failed the first time.” As Foreign Minister, Masmoudi was an outspoken advocate of Tunisian unification with neighboring Libya. His abrupt decision to go into exile in 1974 was prompted by a power struggle with Tunisian Premier Hedi Nouira, who was vociferously opposed to any such union and who used his influence to convince aging President Bourguiba that Masmoudi had to go.

Buffeted by the Masmoudi comeback, Nouira has been forced to change his tune. Aware of the pro-unification sentiment in the country, which is shared by President Bourguiba, Nouira called a special meeting of national Destour Party in which he refuted any rumors that he was “about to retire because of the precarious economic situation in the country.” In an about face, he declared that he was wholeheartedly in support of expanding Libyan-Tunisian ties. According to *Le Monde* Sept. 13, “Nouira is playing a delicate game. He is hardly appreciated in Tripoli, which holds him responsible for having sabotaged the original unification accord. Internally, he must face the offensive of the pro-Libyan clan, led by Masmoudi who is claiming authorship for the current movement toward unification.”

“I have always considered that Tunisia was not an island and that it was necessary to complete its independence by linking it with the neighboring states in a Maghreb (North Africa) framework,” said Masmoudi in an interview.

Tunisian political circles that have lately revealed that a rapprochement with Libya was in the making immediately contacted Masmoudi, the mastermind of the original unification plan. In a meeting in Tripoli a few weeks ago with Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi, Masmoudi and Habib Achour, president of Tunisia's powerful UGTT trade union confederation, outlined a program for strengthening Libyan-Tunisian relations particularly in the area of manpower exchange. This meeting was preceded by Tunisian Agricultural Minister Hassan Belkhodja's five day stay in Libya at the

beginning of August. Apparently Belkhodja returned to Tunisia as the bearer of significant agricultural agreements also in the area of worker exchange. Libya, whose constant shortage of manpower has been further aggravated by the war with Egypt (many Libyan workers are on active military duty at the Egyptian border), is seeking Tunisian workers to fill the gap. From Tunisia, the pro-unification sentiment is due to a severe lack of capital needed to finance the new and ambitious five-year development program. Masmoudi's original plan explicitly linked Tunisia's skilled manpower to Libya's capital wealth.

Masmoudi's return is also expected to help neutralize the U.S. National Security Council-directed “human rights” destabilization now being staged against the pro-European government of President Bourguiba. Ramsey Clark, international terrorist controller and leading member of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, has been operating out of Tunisia through the Tunisian League for the Defense of the Rights of Man, led by “liberal” lawyer and former Tunisian Defense Minister Ahmed Mestiri.

### *Euro-Maghreb Cooperation*

In addition to smoothing out the internal difficulties of Tunisia and putting the economy on a more stable footing, Masmoudi will no doubt use his powerful international business connections and political know-how to bring the Maghreb community into a unified Arab political stance, coherent with European diplomatic intervention, for peace and development. Masmoudi, known as a close personal friend of Charles de Gaulle, was responsible for engineering the 1975 French-Libyan deal for Mirage jet fighters which helped to swing Libya into the pro-French camp. Sometimes called “that man from Dassault,” referring to the Gaullist-linked aerospace firm which manufactures the Mirage, Masmoudi will be coordinating with Qaddafi his peacemaking efforts to settle the Egyptian-Libyan dispute as well as the Algerian-Moroccan feud.

In respect to the latter, Qaddafi has offered to mediate the conflict over the Western Sahara which has brought Algeria and Morocco to the brink of war. The chief thorn to be removed is the sham Polisario Liberation Front which is using a “human rights” cover to sucker Algeria into backing its war against Morocco for rights to the phosphate-rich Spanish Sahara. Masmoudi, with his strong French connections may be able to use his influence to revive Algeria-French relations, which have suffered severely as a result of the Polisario affair.