

Africa Report by Douglas DeGroot

Qaddafi backers target Northern Africa

Upheavals in Tunisia and Morocco are part of a scenario to create a Muslim fundamentalist Saharan empire.

The five days of riots which swept Tunisia beginning on Dec. 29 were the first steps in carrying out a project to tear up the nation-states in northwest Africa and replace them with a loosely-knit empire which one Mideast source refers to as "The Greater Sahara." This empire is to fall under the domination of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi and his Muslim Brotherhood apparatus.

Sources in Europe have warned of upcoming political assassinations and social upheavals in Morocco, another moderate North African state. The overthrow of the Moroccan government would be a necessary ingredient of the projected destabilization of northern Africa. It is rumored that an assassination operation against King Hassan II is being set up for the month of February, one year after the assassination of his reputed right-hand man, General Dlimi. Food price increases have also opened the way for unrest.

The economic crisis in the region has created a tinderbox which the Islamic fundamentalists can successfully ignite. In Tunisia, a small but well-organized underground Muslim Brotherhood subversion network is agitating against the government. Worsening balance of payments crises, compounded by International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditionalities demanding the elimination of subsidies on consumer products, have created a volatile political environment, as the Tunisian riots—provoked by a near doubling of the price of bread—demonstrated clearly.

Tunisia, the most secularized of Islamic countries in the Mideast and North Africa, with one of the highest standards of living in Africa, is considered the weak link in North Africa because of the confluence of its economic difficulties and the struggle over who will gain power in the country after the departure of 83-year-old President Habib Bourguiba, who has ruled for 27 years.

The world economic depression has caused a decline in tourism and oil revenue, and has reduced the demand for Tunisian guest workers abroad. The drop in these primary sources of foreign exchange set the country up for the IMF treatment.

Sixty percent of the 6.5 million population of Tunisia is under the age of 20, with a relatively high level of education and therefore high expectations. High unemployment thus creates a fertile recruiting ground for the destabilizers.

Bourguiba has rescinded the big increase in the price of bread and other consumer items, but remains confronted with his original economic predicament. Last year nearly one-fourth of the budget deficit came from food subsidies. If prices are not increased, the subsidies in 1984 are expected to account for over 10 percent of government spending.

This is complicated by the succession struggle which is pitting those who want to maintain a one-party structure against those who want to open the country up to a multi-party system. Both Bourguiba's wife, a significant

force in Tunisian politics, and the present prime minister and designated successor, Mohamed Mzali, favor the latter approach. They also favor making a pragmatic deal with Qaddafi that would allow Tunisian workers to go to Libya, alleviating economic pressure on the country.

Tunisia's secular history is no reason to discount the danger of Muslim fundamentalism there. Prior to the recent legalization of two smaller parties, the Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique (MTI) had become the most prominent pole of opposition in the country. The MTI was established in 1981, and calls for the "resuscitation of the Islamic personality of Tunisia."

Although the MTI has dismissed Qaddafi as a trouble-maker, it is intensely hostile to Western influence, particularly that of the United States. During the recent well-organized riots, the chants of the crowds included: "There is only one God, Bourguiba is the anti-God." In Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, the suppression of the riots by the police and armed forces tended to drive more of the population, originally motivated primarily by economic considerations, into the grasp of the subversive organizers.

The United States, unfortunately, is doing nothing to counter this process. State Department policy since the beginning of the Reagan administration, as relayed primarily by special envoy Vernon Walters, has been marked by a significant decrease in economic aid and a dramatic increase in military assistance to North Africa.

The reduction of economic aid has augmented the potential for unrest, giving the anti-American radicals the opportunity to denounce the military aid as building up the apparatus of repression. U.S. policy has thus played into the scenario for polarizing these nations.