

## ERIC MARGOLIS



# Mideast surprise

Just when Washington thought it safe to go back into the waters of the Middle East came a very nasty surprise. On Aug. 13, ultra-conservative Morocco allied itself to ultra-radical Libya.

The feudal regime of Morocco's King Hassan II has long been taken for granted by the U.S. as a close ally and bullwark against the spread of Libyan intrigues. Hassan was also regarded as the Arab leader most likely to promote acceptance of Israel.

Until Aug. 12, Hassan and Libya's Col. Khadafy have been bitter enemies. On their first meeting, the impetuous Khadafy, seeing one of Hassan's courtiers bow and kiss the king's hand, jumped out of his chair and cried, "Shame, Arabs are free men, they do not kiss hands like slaves."

Bad blood grew quickly between the two rulers. Each called for the other's overthrow: Hassan backed CIA attempts to oust Khadafy who riposted with plots of his own.

These unneighborly relations were exacerbated by the Saharan War. Libya joined socialist Algeria in backing the Polisario rebels fighting against Morocco's attempts to annex the phosphate-rich region of Western Sahara, a former colony of Spain. The 10-year-old guerrilla war has been draining the Moroccan treasure.

The U.S. has not done much to support Morocco in its war in spite of Hassan's discreet military aid to U.S. allies in west and central Africa. Recently, Washington has tried to induce Morocco to send troops to Chad with the aim of ousting the 5,000 Libyan troops occupying the north of that embattled nation.

On Aug. 12, U.S. officials believed Moroccan troops would go to Chad to fight the Libyans; on Aug. 13, in a typical Middle Eastern surprise, Morocco and Libya announced at Oujda "a brotherly union."

### Hard-headed Hassan

For marriage-minded Libya, this was the sixth try at some sort of merger; all previous attempts with Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Syria, have failed. Nothing Libya does is by now surprising, but why would hard-headed King Hassan ally himself to his former enemy? Why would he risk Washington's wrath by embracing America's bete noire?

Reason 1: Khadafy agreed to drop his support of Polisario in return for Morocco's agreement not to threaten Libyan interests in Chad. Algeria, a rival of both Morocco and Libya, was left as the sole Polisario backer.

Reason 2: Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania recently signed a regional alliance. Though militarily insignificant, this pact worried Libya and Morocco. Algeria and little Tunisia are now squeezed between unfriendly Libya and Morocco.

Reason 3: Perhaps the most important. U.S. aid to chronically poor Morocco has amounted to a paltry \$140 million annually. Moroccan requests for more money have fallen on deaf ears in Congress — no extra funds are available, and for good reason.

This year, the U.S. will provide Israel with nearly \$3 billion in aid; \$2.6 billion will go to Egypt to keep it at peace with Israel; almost \$1 billion will go to Sudan, an ally of Egypt. Hassan, who has done much to promote an Arab-Israeli understanding, and recently hosted a major Jewish conference in his country to which Israelis were invited, was reported outraged. The Camp David Agreement members were getting \$6.6 billion while Morocco only \$140 million.

It is probable that Libya has offered some billions in aid to Hassan. We also know that there is a great deal of resentment among Washington's Arab allies over what they regard as America's neglect of their interests in favor of its deepening "approachment" with Israel.

Jordan and Kuwait, two of America's closest regional allies, are buying arms, for the first time, from Russia. Egypt has just re-established diplomatic relations with Moscow and the Saudis are also rumored to be considering a similar move. Morocco's new alliance with Libya is only the latest evidence that Washington has failed to keep an equilibrium in its Middle East alliance structure.

The Moroccan-Libyan alliance may well prove ephemeral; it nevertheless connotes some significant strategic shifts in the region. U.S. influence is clearly diminishing, nationalistic and radical influence is growing.

### Washington's muted reaction

These changes have caused Spain and France to react with ill-concealed alarm. The Spanish general staff warned that combined Libyan-Moroccan forces would outnumber their own. Spain's remaining North African enclaves might be in jeopardy.

French President Francois Mitterrand rushed to Morocco on Aug. 30 for secret talks with Hassan. The French were clearly worried that their position in Chad, and their garrison there of 3,000 troops, might be imperilled by the new alliance. The Oujda Treaty might also seriously threaten France's client states in West Africa.

Washington's public reaction was muted. In private, U.S. officials were caught by surprise and sorely chagrined. Once again, with painful repetition, senior American policymakers had refused to listen to unwelcome reports until it was too late.

The true beneficiaries of these machinations are Libya and Russia. Moscow has gained at least a temporary foothold, through its Libyan ally, on the western mouth of the Mediterranean. Preoccupied elsewhere, Washington forgot all about Morocco. Crafty King Hassan knows that nothing restores interest like the attentions of a new suitor.

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