

# A GREATER ARAB MAGHREB – MYTH BECOMES REALITY?

*Five North African countries take a tentative step towards political and economic union.*

BY JULIE MORIN

**I**BN KHALDOUN, THE FAMOUS FOURTEENTH century Tunisian historian and sociologist, reminds readers in his masterly work *The History of the Berbers*, that the Arabs called all the land west of the Gulf of Sirte, the “Maghreb” – the West – and all the territory to the east of the Gulf, the “Machreq” or the East. Today the Greater Arab Maghreb contains five countries: Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania. Their heads of state are, respectively, Colonel Mouammar Qaddafi, President Ben Ali, President Chadli Bendjedid, King Hassan II and Colonel Ould Taya.

Ibn Khaldoun writes of a rich and tumultuous past which has made itself felt throughout the region: the same language, Arabic, is spoken everywhere, though with certain differences of accent and dialect. All these countries are deeply Muslim; from the shores of the Mediterranean to the heart of the desert, the faithful heed the calls to prayer that come from minarets at the centre of each village. Despite many quarrels these countries see themselves as brothers and have long dreamt of being united. It was not, however, until their leaders met at the Marrakech Summit in February 1989, that the idea of a union became a reality. And the path which led to the creation of the Arab Maghreb Union – *l'Union du Maghreb arabe* (UMA) – had indeed been fraught with difficulty.

In December 1988, a year after Tunisia and Libya resumed diplomatic relations, Tunis welcomed the leader of the Libyan revolution. It was Qaddafi's most important official visit to Tunisia since Ben Ali succeeded Habib Bourguiba in November 1987. By the time the Libyan head of state left three days later he had succeeded in shocking people by attacking the West, particularly the United States, and condemning Yasser Arafat for recognizing the state of Israel. Qaddafi's visit proved beneficial, however, for he offered Tunisia a significant amount of economic aid. The two heads of state reached agreement on a variety of projects which had been in abeyance because of earlier disputes.

Tunisia could not have asked for more. Like other countries in the Maghreb it is in the

throes of a serious economic crisis; there is high unemployment especially among young people just out of school. Relations between Bourguiba and Qaddafi had always been bad and had worsened steadily until in September 1985 diplomatic relations were severed. Ben Ali's new regime is anxious, therefore, to put aside previous disputes, despite the fact that the two governments continue to differ on various issues. And in Tunis as elsewhere Qaddafi's reckless outbursts give rise to a good deal of mistrust.

TUNISIA AND LIBYA ARE NOT THE ONLY countries to be reconciled. In order for the UMA to come into being, Algeria and Morocco have also had to resolve their differences. This they accomplished after many years of disagreement over the Western Sahara. In March 1976 the Polisario Front, an organization which had been demanding the independence of this old Spanish colony, proclaimed the Democratic Sahrawi Arab Republic under Mohammed Abdelaziz. Algeria recognized the new state immediately, but this did not please Morocco, which itself laid claim to the territory. Morocco then severed diplomatic relations with Algeria.

The first attempts at reconciliation occurred in May 1987 when President Chadli Bendjedid met King Hassan II at Akid Lofti on the Algeria-Morocco frontier. A year later, in May 1988, Algeria and Morocco resumed diplomatic contacts, and last February just before the 1989 summit, King Hassan II received the Algerian President. In March the two heads of state settled a longstanding border dispute by ratifying the 1972 Convention which defined hundreds of kilometres of border between their two countries. This about-face in Morocco-Algerian relations had one unfortunate result – the isolation of the Polisario Front. Article 15 of the UMA constitution stipulates that the member states – in this case Algeria – will tolerate on their territory no activity which might threaten the security or frontiers of another member state; Polisario can no longer count on aid from Algeria.

As for Mauritania – to which Spain had ceded the southern part of the Western Sahara – it signed a peace treaty with Polisario in 1979 thus withdrawing from a conflict that had proved disastrous for its economy. It is only natural that Mauritania be part of the AMU, given the historical and cultural links it has with the other countries, and as the poorest of the five members it has the most to gain.

ANOTHER IMPORTANT FACTOR MAKING THE UMA possible was that some of the governments concerned have succeeded in bringing greater social and political stability to their countries and are now pursuing a more democratic course. This is definitely the case with Tunisia where the date 7 November 1987 has taken on a certain magical connotation. It is the day when a new president, the second in Tunisia's history, was inaugurated – a moment long awaited by a people worried about rising social instability and tired of Habib Bourguiba.

On the night of 6 November 1987, after forty-one years as head of state, Habib Bourguiba, the founder of the New Destourien Party and father of independence, was removed from office. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, then prime minister, took control of the country. Tunisians welcomed Ben Ali's regime and its democratic aspirations; various influential groups, such as the Tunisian League for Human Rights, were delighted with the new approach. Ben Ali's first year in office was uneventful; the majority of Tunisians felt it was too early for criticism. However, there were worrying developments which some felt should not go unnoticed.

One incident was the government's confiscation of the 16 December 1988 issue of *Réalités*, an independent weekly that had suffered greatly from censorship under Bourguiba. The reason given for the seizure was that an editorial by a well-known Tunisian intellectual, Hichem Djait, contained defamatory remarks. This action by the government created a great stir among the journalists, several of whom asked, with some justification, whether the independent press was only “provisionally” free.

Later on, in April, Tunisians were called upon for the first time in their history to elect a