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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

28 August 1985

Algeria: Intentions Toward Morocco

Summary

Available evidence does not indicate that Algeria constitutes the imminent threat portrayed recently to US officials by the Moroccan Prime Minister. Their historically troubled relationship is at a low level over the Western Sahara conflict and King Hassan's political union with Libya. Nevertheless, Algiers, in our judgment, does not want the situation to deteriorate to such a point that large-scale military hostilities are likely. With regard to the Western Sahara problem, small skirmishes probably will continue with little warning along Morocco's defensive berm. Algeria will want to keep the pressure on King Hassan to force him to negotiate an arrangement allowing some Saharan autonomy. The greatest danger is that these minor clashes might lead to unpremeditated warfare. We do not believe, however, that Algiers is actively seeking Hassan's overthrow, which could produce a more hostile government in Rabat. Bendjedid's willingness to tighten the screws on Rabat may also be constrained by Hassan's "union" with Libya, and the danger that Algiers could suddenly encounter hostilities on both its eastern and western borders. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Maghreb Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. It was requested by the office of the Vice President. Information as of 28 August 1985 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be directed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, [redacted]

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Moroccan Dissidents: A New Angle?

The most recent incident highlighting the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria are charges by Rabat, heatedly denied by Algiers, that the Algerians are attempting to foment political instability in Morocco. Last week, the government of Morocco put on trial 17 dissidents whom it claimed were captured in July after entering the country from Algeria. Rabat also claims the dissidents were trained by Algerian security officials.

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[redacted] We cannot confirm the Algerian link to the dissidents, however, or ascertain the extent, if any, to which Algeria has given support to other Moroccan dissidents. [redacted]

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If the alleged Algerian role is true, Algiers indeed may have decided to put pressure on the regime of King Hassan by stirring up trouble inside Morocco, rather than trying to do something on the Western Sahara issue. [redacted]

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[redacted] President Bendjedid is under pressure from his senior Army officers to take more forceful action against Morocco. They are concerned about Bendjedid's refusal to prevent Rabat's completion of an extensive network of defensive berms in the Western Sahara. The more leftist-leaning officers [redacted] are disgruntled with Bendjedid's courting of the US and the West, particularly because of continued US and French military support for Morocco. These officers want to give the Polisario guerrillas more weapons and have them prosecute the war with Morocco with even greater vigor. Bendjedid may have decided to sponsor Moroccan dissident activity as a concession to these officers. [redacted]

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An alternative scenario is that the dissidents were allowed to reside in Algeria, but that their plans and activities were not closely monitored by the government. Senior security and military officials opposed to Bendjedid also may have sponsored the infiltrations, expecting them to fail, to embarrass Bendjedid by illustrating to foreigners the "contradictions" in the moderate foreign policy image he has sought to establish. We believe this may have been the case with last spring's abortive PLO-planned raid on Israeli defense headquarters. [redacted]

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[REDACTED]

Bendjedid's eagerly-awaited state visit to Washington. In our opinion, Bendjedid is too smart to have approved something doomed to fail which would have impacted negatively on his trip to the United States. [REDACTED]

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Legacy of Bitterness

Rabat's accusations of Algerian support for dissidents is the latest theme in the long history of antagonism between Morocco and Algeria. Underlying the dispute are deep-seated suspicions based on political, geographic, economic, and psychological factors. Both have the largest populations and most abundant resources in the Maghreb, and each views the other as the principal roadblock to its own regional dominance. In addition, the political systems of the two countries -- revolutionary socialism in contrast to a feudal monarchy -- are antithetical. [REDACTED]

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The principal source of tension between Algeria and Morocco in the past decade has been Rabat's claim to the Western Sahara. Algerian leaders believe their assistance to the Polisario is necessary both to counter what they see as Moroccan expansionism, and to demonstrate the country's commitment to foreign groups fighting wars of national liberation. Although Algeria has won the political battle thus far in the OAU and nonaligned movement by gaining widespread diplomatic recognition for the Saharan Democratic Arab Republic (SDAR), its prospects on the battlefield -- where the outcome will be really determined -- are grim. Morocco's commitment of 80,000 men and the construction of the defensive perimeter during the past two years has proven effective in defending the territory from attacks by the 3,500 Polisario. Moreover, King Hassan's political union with Libya has created a potentially new threat on Algeria's eastern frontier, and Algeria will now have to consider possible hostile action from Libya if it were to become embroiled with Morocco in a crisis. [REDACTED]

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Algiers has tried different, and often contradictory, strategies in its struggle to counter these diplomatic and military setbacks. President Bendjedid earlier this year placed emphasis on finding a political solution, almost certainly realizing that the Moroccan berm campaign precludes any semblance of a military victory by the Polisario. Hassan's rejection of Algerian peace plans, however, appears to have encouraged Algiers to adopt a more confrontational policy toward Morocco. For example, contacts between the two countries have been reduced, and we are seeing more intensive Algerian efforts among

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nonaligned countries to win wider diplomatic recognition for the Polisario (Liberia recently recognized the SDAR [Redacted] and some press reports suggest India may follow suit). [Redacted]

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The Algerian Strategy: More of the Same

In our judgment, however, Algier's continued support for the Polisario, and its diplomatic wrangling with Rabat, are the primary elements in Bendjedid's program to harass Hassan for his "intransigence" on the Western Sahara problem. The Algerians probably believe that they can make the Western Sahara conflict so costly that Hassan at some point will agree to some Saharan autonomy. Algeria may also anticipate that its support of the Polisario will deter Hassan from a more ambitious scheme to resurrect the idea of a "greater Morocco," which includes not only the Western Sahara, but Mauritania and parts of southwest Algeria as well. [Redacted]

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We believe that the Bendjedid government does not want a major military conflict with Morocco. Even though Algeria enjoys an overwhelming military advantage along the frontier, its leadership almost certainly realizes that the rugged terrain along the border would limit military action to cross-border strikes by Algeria that could lead to a protracted war of attrition. Algiers may also realize that Morocco has a clear advantage along the southern portion of the border, and could overrun Tindouf, the only significant Algerian settlement in the southwest and the political and military headquarters of the Polisario. Rabat could also launch air strikes against Algeria's strategic petroleum and natural gas facilities. [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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Alternative Scenarios

A number of developments might compel Algeria to reassess its position toward Morocco and encourage its leaders to adopt an even tougher policy. A decision by King Hassan to engage in "hot pursuit" of Polisario guerrillas into Algeria, or possibly into northern Mauritania, might lead the Algerians to become more directly involved in the fighting and to use its Army to harass the Moroccans along the northern frontier. This could lead to an unmediated conflict between the two countries. [redacted]

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There are other less likely scenarios which, in our opinion, could result in a more aggressive anti-Hassan posture. Morocco's purchase of highly sophisticated weapon systems, for example, might cause Bendjedid to feel more threatened and to consider a preemptive military strike. The Bendjedid government probably would respond militarily if it believed that Morocco and Libya were planning aggression against it, or in retaliation for a hostile act, such as terrorism. Bendjedid might even consider the military option if he and his advisors perceived Moroccan-Libyan involvement in a clandestine operation to subvert his government. [redacted]

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SUBJECT: Algeria: Intentions Toward Morocco

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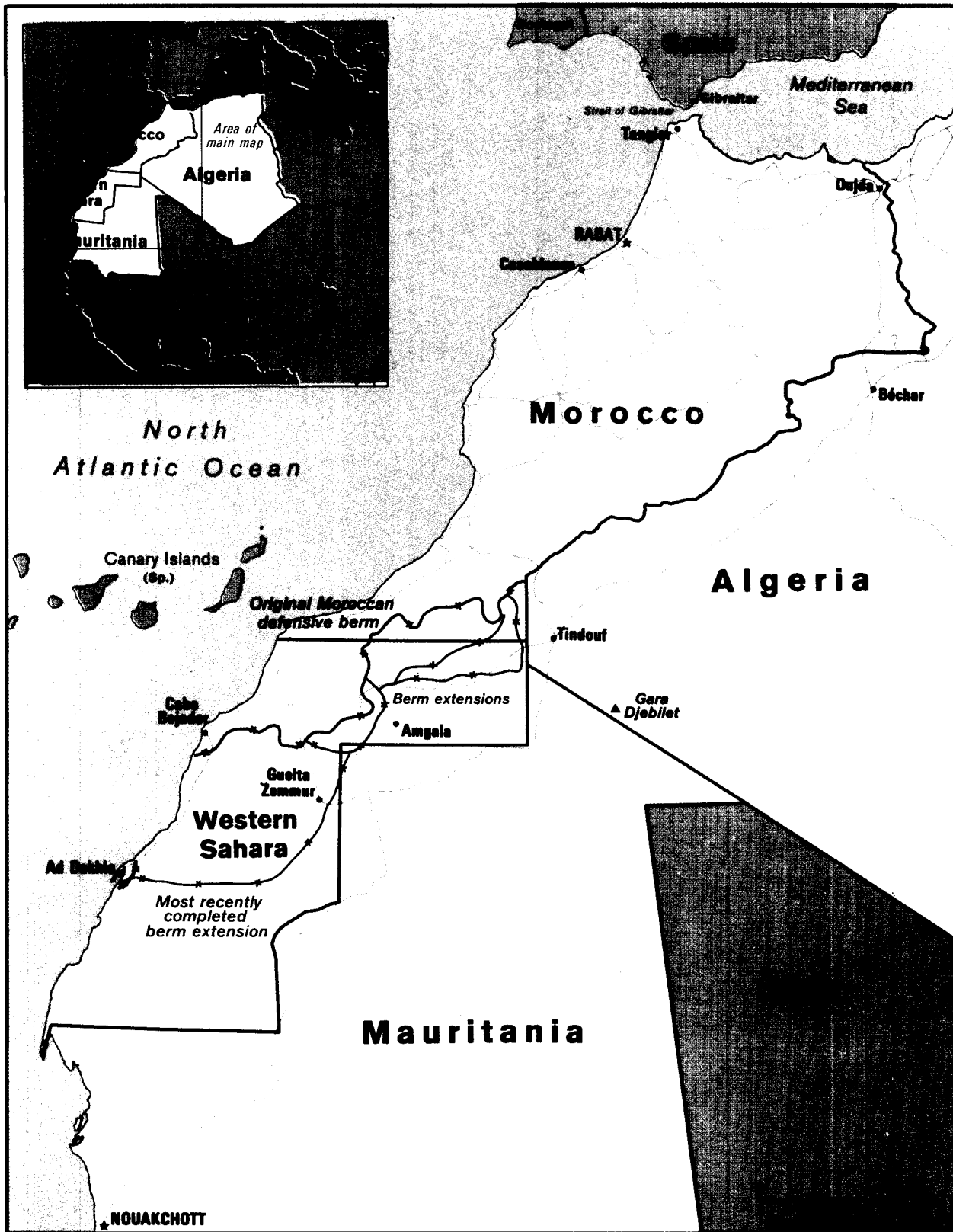
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