

EIR Documentation

The actual causes of the Libyan-Tunisian crisis

by Philip Golub and Thierry Lalevée

A group of eight Western journalists has just concluded a five-day fact-finding mission to Tunisia, invited by the Tunisian authorities to investigate the ongoing military and political crisis in the Maghreb (northern Africa). The following articles are by two members of that delegation: Philip Golub, EIR bureau chief in Wiesbaden, West Germany; and EIR Mideast Editor Thierry Lalevée. They point to the need for increased Western support for Tunisia, which is facing both a military challenge from Libya, as well as the same economic problems now facing all developing sector nations.

On Aug. 5, 1985, the Libyan regime began a "Nacht und Nebel" action to round up thousands of Tunisian immigrant workers and expel them from Libya, *manu militari*. As in the "Nacht und Nebel" police sweeps of Nazi-occupied Europe during World War II, whereby persons considered a threat to the Nazi authorities were snatched from their homes in the secrecy of night and arrested without legal recourse, hundreds of Tunisian immigrant engineers, laborers, artisans, and shopkeepers were seized by youths wielding Soviet-built Kalashnikov machine guns, and were ordered into buses which then transported them, sometimes over many hundreds of kilometers, to the Libyan-Tunisian border. The Libyan youths conducting the sweeps belonged to the "Revolutionary Committees," which act as Col. Muammar Qaddafi's repressive secret police force.

Militarized Revolutionary Committee escorts accompanied the buses to their destination at Ras Jedir, the Tunisian border post on the Mediterranean coast. All of the immigrants' belongings were seized; bank accounts were frozen, and their gold and jewels stolen along with their household

goods. Those who came across the border arrived penniless, sometimes after having worked for years or decades in Libya. Some had been working in Libya long before Qaddafi's coup d'état in 1969.

Nine hundred and forty-seven Tunisians were expelled on the 5th day of August; 1,420 on the 6th; 1,262 on the 7th; 1,403 on the 9th; 753 on the 10th; 801 on the 11th; 906 on the 12th; 733 on the 13th; 677 on the 14th; 1,652 on the 15th; 2,237 on the 16th; 783 on the 17th; 1,895 on the 18th. By Sept. 3, the total had reached 30,000. Some had left their families behind, and many reported having been beaten, while others, anger and shock still in their eyes, declared they had been witnesses to the rape of Tunisian women by Libyan Revolutionary Committee members.

Across the border at Ras Jedir on the Libyan side, one sees slogans and posters of Qaddafi while the Libyans blare propaganda from the *Green Book* from loudspeakers. An old marker with the Italian inscription "Tripolitania" notes the distance to the Libyan capital: Tripoli 169 km. The troops cannot be seen from the ground; however, they are deployed only a few kilometers from the frontier. The expulsions are continuing daily, and the crisis is far from over.

Since early August, the armed forces of both Libya and Tunisia have been in a state of maximum alert. On Aug. 21, at the height of the expulsions—20,000 had already been forcibly deported—the Libyan regime massed troops along the Tunisian-Libyan border. Two days later, the Libyan Air Force violated Tunisian air space and engaged in naval maneuvers. The Tunisian army counter-mobilized and discreetly warned its allies of the danger of an upcoming invasion. Algeria, the United States, and France were consulted. On Aug. 29, the Libyan government withdrew all Libyan civil-

ians living within 50 km of the 255-kilometer stretch between the border at Ras Jedir and the south. Renewed violation of Tunisian airspace occurred on Sept. 1 over the island of Djerba.

It is estimated that the Libyans have over 50,000 troops covering the Tunisian-Libyan border, while the rest are deployed to cover the permanently tense Libyan-Egyptian front. While the Tunisian army is considerably smaller than that of Libya, it is well trained and has been regularly modernizing its arms since the attack on Gafsa by Libyan commandos in 1981. The United States as well as France has been called upon to upgrade the technical level of Tunisian forces.

While a Libyan invasion is not probable, it cannot be altogether ruled out. More likely, however, is a middle- to long-term Libyan effort to destabilize Tunisia economically and politically. Tunisian government authorities informed us that with the mass expulsions, Libya is seeking to exacerbate the already difficult economic situation of Tunisia. Over \$25 million worth of savings and goods were stolen from the Tunisians already deported. At the same time, through terrorism and sabotage, Libyan intelligence has sought and is seeking to create chaos and disorganization.

Last week, Tunisian police and security organizations arrested three Libyan intelligence operatives who had been coordinating a plan to sabotage electricity generators, oil installations and public buildings. Tunisia also expelled 23 Libyan "diplomats" who were coordinating the campaign with these three, along with 213 other agents who had infiltrated the country posing as immigrant workers. Tunisia's foreign Minister, Mr. Caid Essebsi, informed us they have nipped the first operations in the bud, and are prepared for further actions.

Tunisian Prime Minister Mzali, addressing a meeting of the cadres of the Destour Party, the government, the chiefs of staff, and the international press at the "Maison du Parti" in Tunis on Sept. 4, warned Libya that were Libya to engage in terrorism, Tunisia would "strike back." "We thought cooperation with Libya was possible," said Mzali. "In December 1984, we negotiated an agreement with Libya which specifically stressed the need to give priority to the treatment of Tunisia workers in Libya. Libya violated those agreements, just as they broke the commercial agreements of '84. . . . They think they will create problems for our economy and want to create an economic collapse. . . . The enemy says that we are pro-American and that he will cut off the hand of those who shake Ronald Reagan's hand. . . . [W]e are free. We want cooperation with all nations. . . why did the President [Bourguiba] go to the United States? He is free and had something to tell the United States," declared Mzali, who called for national unity in face of the crisis with Libya. Mzali furthermore announced that Tunisia had decided to withdraw *all of its workers and technicians* from Libya rather than face the prospect of permanent blackmail.

Tunisian government and party officials are confident that they can repel a military or terrorist adventure. The director

of the Destour Party and minister delegated to the prime minister, Mr. Hedi Bakkoush, noted that Libya should not underestimate Tunisia's capacity for retaliation in all domains. He and others noted that Qaddafi's assault on Tunisia had solidified national unity within the country. At the same time, he said, it has demonstrated the scope of international support for Tunisia, in contrast with Qaddafi's increasing isolation. "Qaddafi is weakening his own economy," declared Bakkoush. "Many of those expelled are technicians with know how, who are part of cooperation programs. Others played vital functions in the Libyan economy."

Independent investigation corroborates this. While Qaddafi sought to aggravate a difficult economic situation, he only succeeded in consolidating the authority of the Tunisian government. At the same time, he has further isolated Libya in the region and internationally. On Sept. 2, Algerian President Bendjedid Chadli arrived in Tunis to express his nation's total support for Tunisia in the ongoing crisis. While Egypt was not consulted by Tunis in the course of the past weeks, President Mubarak warned Qaddafi on Sept. 3 that his assault upon Tunisia would backfire. On the afternoon of Sept. 4 it was made known that the chief of staff of the American Navy, Admiral James D. Watkins, had met with President Bourguiba and the heads of the Tunisian armed forces. In a strong expression of American support, Admiral Watkins declared: "This is my first visit in Tunisia and I consider this visit as one of the most important that I have done in foreign countries. I was very honored to meet Tunisia's very courageous President this morning and to express to him our admiration, our sympathy, and our continuing support in this critical moment. Our meeting was very cordial. I will remember it for the rest of my life." A destroyer from the French Mediterranean fleet could be seen in Tunis harbor on that same day.

Yet, in spite of this international support, intelligence sources note that American and European economic interests in Libya are such, that although Tunisia can expect support in the case of an outright invasion, the West will take no action against Qaddafi. It is with an ironic smile that these sources note that while the Soviets and their surrogates have over 15,000 spies, technicians, and military personnel stationed in Libya, the United States continues to trade with them, while many Libyan companies headquartered in Switzerland are headed by Americans or Europeans.

Tunisian government and party officials summarize their situation in the following way: "We are facing the problem of relocating, housing, feeding, and eventually finding jobs for 100,000 people. It will not be easy. But we are not barbarians. We stand for civilization, for Western civilization and rationality. We are a democracy and have inherited a civilization which has existed for millennia and which is now part of modern civilization." The President of the Parliament, Mr. Messadi, concluded our interview by softly saying: "It is perhaps for that very reason that Qaddafi is trying to destroy us now."