

STAT

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 11APHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
8 APRIL 1980

STAT

Morocco: Stable for now,

By Stanley Karnow

MARRAKESH, MOROCCO — Flanking the gateway to the Mediterranean, this North African kingdom is potentially crucial to American strategic interests in southern Europe and the Middle East. A major question at the moment, however, is whether its stability can be preserved.

King Hassan II, who has ruled here for nearly two decades, is a moderate compared to most other Arab leaders. Among other things, he has worked behind the scenes to encourage the rapprochement between Egypt and Israel. For internal reasons, though, he regime may be wobbly.

He narrowly survived a couple of attempted military coups back in the early 1970s. Clever and distrustful, he governs by manipulating the country's various factions, alternately dispensing patronage or cracking down on dissidents.

A Central Intelligence Agency study leaked last fall predicted that Hassan would collapse within a year. But that gloomy estimate apparently mirrors an effort by the CIA to cover itself after having been too optimistic about the deposed Shah of Iran.

Though he is one of the few remaining Muslim monarchs, Hassan differs from the shah in several respects. In contrast to the shah, who cut himself off from Iran's religious community, Hassan combines the roles of king and ayatollah.

Unlike the shah, moreover, Hassan permits a half-dozen political parties to function, tolerating their criticism as long as they operate within his essentially authoritarian system. He even underwrites the Communists, mainly for cosmetic purposes.

Hassan's strongest card has been his claim to the Western Sahara, formerly a Spanish possession. The war he is waging in that vast wasteland against the so-called Polisario Front serves to unify Moroccans,

who are passionately nationalistic.

But his shrewd maneuvers may not be sufficient to keep Morocco on an even keel. And while it would be foolhardy to forecast an upheaval here, it would be irresponsible to ignore the dangers that may lie ahead.

The conflict in the desert is militarily unwinnable by either side. While it provides Hassan with a patriotic issue, it is an expensive liability that currently costs Morocco about \$1.5 million a day. Saudi Arabia foots much of the bill, but the war nevertheless drains the Moroccan economy, which also is being hit by soaring oil prices.

Because he relies on the war to mobilize domestic support, Hassan cannot dare make concessions to his enemies. At the same time, however, he may not be able to bear the burden over a long period. So he is trapped in a situation that both sustains and weakens him.

Judging from its past record, the army could be the biggest threat to his rule. Sensitive to that threat, Hassan maintains a tight leash on his senior officers. Military units in the Sahara, for instance, are required to communicate with each other through him.

The Moroccan army suffered a serious defeat a few weeks ago because a column under attack by Polisario guerrillas was unable to call for help directly, but had to channel its request through Hassan, who evidently responded too slowly.

Western sources familiar with the Moroccan army suggest that its junior officers are becoming increasingly frustrated with a war they cannot win and cannot afford to lose. There is no sign that their mood is being translated into opposition against Hassan, but such stirrings are always difficult to detect.

The two coup attempts against Hassan in 1971 and 1972 were staged by his closest military subordinates without the slightest advance indication.

Despite his role as Morocco's religious chief, a position written into the constitution, Hassan also might be threatened by Muslim fundamentalists who contend that he has violated Islamic tenets.

One such critic, Abdeljelil Yacine, obliquely attacks Hassan by asserting that only a Koranic state can resolve Morocco's class conflicts. Yacine has been in and out of jail

but . . .

It is impossible to measure whether this fundamentalism represents a real force. But the other day, when I asked a group of sophisticated Moroccan businessmen to tell me the person they most admire, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini topped the list. Hassan, incidentally figured low on their list.

Perhaps the largest threat to Hassan is the widening gulf between rich and poor, primarily the result of the fact that the Moroccan population, now 18 million, has doubled over the past 20 years.

Morocco's schools have been producing thousands of graduates who cannot find jobs because economic growth is lagging behind education. Many of these youths are radicals, and their agitation could trigger ferment in the abysmal shantytowns that plague every Moroccan city.

Aware of the risks inherent in this social powderkeg, Hassan repeatedly promises improvements. But he has done little except to raise expectations that he is unable to fulfill, and that may augur trouble.

Concerned by these threats to Morocco, the Carter administration recently agreed to sell Hassan some \$250 million worth of military equipment — the implicit terms of the deal being that he settle the Sahara war and turn his attention to the nation's pressing problems.

But Hassan rejects any strings attached to the arms sale, as he told me in an interview. He simply cannot seek a compromise with the Polisario or its Algerian supporters without jeopardizing his regime.

Fundamentally, there is virtually nothing that the United States can do to assure Hassan's stability. Besides, Americans are bum advisers to other countries. The dilemma, though, is that Morocco is vital to U.S. interests.

John Waterbury, one of America's foremost Mideast specialists, has noted that Morocco always appears to be on the verge of an explosion that never occurs. That may be the case at present, and it could be that Hassan will survive. If not, the alternative could be disastrous.