12 Soviet-Maghribi Relations in the 1980s
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INTRODUCTION

There is little indication that the Soviet Union sees North Africa as much of a region. The term ‘Maghrib’ or ‘Arab Maghrib’ is used in Soviet Arabic broadcasts since it is part of the Arabic language, but it is scarcely used in Russian writings and speeches. The Maghrib is seen as part of the regions to which it belongs – the Arab world, Africa, the Mediterranean, and the newly independent formerly colonised developing world, and it is referred to in these terms in Soviet discussions. On the other hand, it is composed of four very different countries, each with its own brand of bilateral relations with the Soviet Union. It is this bilateralism which is dominant, and between it and the broader worlds to which the four countries belong, North Africa as a sub-region loses its significance in Soviet eyes.

In the bilateral relations of the Soviet Union with each of the four countries of the region, what are the strategies and criteria that determine Soviet policies, and how do these policies relate to the Maghribi states’ strategies and criteria? More specifically, does the Soviet Union seek special relations with the big countries of a region like North Africa and pay less attention to the smaller ones; do its relations improve the ‘more socialist’ the country; does it seek to establish beachheads with smaller more vulnerable states; or does it seek to polarise the region on an East-West dimension? The balance sheet for the 1980s, valid for earlier decades as well, shows that the USSR has steadily ‘high’ relations with Algeria, ‘low’ with Tunisia, a medium level with greater fluctuations with Morocco, and a rising ‘diagonal’ of intensifying relations with Libya. It appears that these relationships are important to the USSR, which goes to some lengths to maintain and to balance them. As such, Soviet understanding of these relations tends to correspond to the general expectations of the Maghribi partner (with some disappointment in Libya’s case), and tends to narrow the gap between the reality and image of these relations. But since the relations reflect reality, they also limit the influence one party has over the other.
This chapter will focus on the 1980s, and it will concentrate on Libya, Algeria, and Morocco since they have the most interesting and active relations with the USSR and its satellites. In examining Soviet-Maghribi relations, it will divide the subject matter into three components: foreign policy positions, domestic forms of government, and developmental matters. It will organise its answers to a number of basic questions into four sections: Soviet perceptions of its relations with North African states; Maghribi perceptions; the reality; and the use of influence to change either the perceptions or the reality.

SOVIET PERCEPTIONS

Algeria

Algeria has had historic ties of friendship with the USSR since the national liberation war of 1954–62. Its proclaimed socialist orientation and its dynamic Third World leadership made it attractive in Soviet eyes and a natural partner and ‘ally’. In addition, its relative development among the countries of the Group of 77, its feistily independent foreign posture that covered a broad identity of policy positions with the Soviet Union, its dominant state capitalism and its heavy industry option as a basis for development, and its vanguard single party all provided points of commonality and bases for sympathy.

In all of these aspects, the very fact that Algeria’s policies and positions are its own and are accompanied by a haughty, prickly attitude toward foreign influence only make Algeria a more attractive associate for Moscow. The only incident which has troubled Soviet-Algerian relations was the overthrow of president Ahmed ben Bella by the Algerian army in 1965, just as Soviet analysts were getting caught up in their own debate about the acceptability of military rule as a source of progressive leadership in the Third World. The fall of ben Bella perplexed Soviet analysts, as did the fall of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana the following year and Modibo Keita in Mali in 1968. However, events soon showed that the new government of Houari Boumediene would not have the objectionable Trotskyite advisors of his predecessor, but that it would pursue and even intensify the radical ‘Third World’ foreign policy positions and would strengthen its oil-fuelled state capitalism. The USSR has viewed Algeria as a reliable partner since then.