

ALGERIA IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Dr. Yahia H. ZOUBIR

Report / 2 July 2007 / Cambra de Comerç de Barcelona

One cannot understand the situation in Algeria today without referring, albeit briefly, to the various stages it has gone through since its independence from France in 1962. Indeed, Algeria will be celebrating the 45th anniversary of its independence on 5th July. Although my presentation will focus on Algeria's position in World Affairs, it is critical to analyze how some of the internal developments impacted its foreign policy.

Algeria is the second largest (five times the size of France) and one of the richest countries in Africa. The country enjoyed relative political and social stability until the 1980s. With its sheer size, real and potential wealth, Algeria could conceivably be considered a pivotal state.

Before addressing the various stages that Algeria has experienced, it must be remembered that the country witnessed one of the harshest colonial conditions. The country was devastated by a savage war from 1954-62 that left hundreds of thousands of victims. The departure of the French was not without consequences since Algerians inherited not only a devastated country but also an abandoned administration. The only organized force was the Army of National Liberation, succeeded by the National Popular Army. Thus, Algerians were faced with the task of building a state and mobilizing a nation on the ruins of the colonial system. This explains why the country went through a period of experimentation in the first three years following independence. Following the coup in 1965, the authorities, especially after the nationalization, sought to use the hydrocarbon revenues to institute a welfare system under an authoritarian regime. The oil income allowed the country to pursue a dynamic and quite successful foreign policy. The international legitimacy that the Algerian War of Liberation against France conferred upon Algeria's rulers strengthened its image as one of the leaders of the Third World. Because of the domestic stability and international legitimacy that had characterized Algeria since, few observers predicted the social explosion of October 1988, which resulted from dire socioeconomic conditions that followed the crumbling of the oil prices and the concomitant de-legitimization of the regime. The various constitutional reforms, coupled with the liberalization process, promised to make Algeria one of the most promising democratic regimes in the Arab world. However, the emergence of a strong Islamist movement, which the authorities saw as threat to the survival of the republic, resulted in the cancellation of the democratic process and the institution of a state of emergency that is in place until today. Subsequently, Algeria witnessed a period of instability that lasted almost a decade, which Algerians described as the "red decade" due to the tens of thousands that died as a result of Islamist terrorism and state repression. Before dealing with that decade and the return to normalcy, it is necessary to make a few points:

1. Given its relative regional and international influence, Western countries hardly ever perceived Algeria as an erratic state, such as Libya, for instance;
2. Algeria's relations with the Western world, especially with the United States, have invariably been marked by misunderstandings, suspicion and at times great animosity, mostly concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also hostilities in Vietnam, Cuba, and the Western Sahara;
3. The reasons for Algeria's deep-seated stance are primarily historical, and have thus affected the Algerian psyche and historical memory;
4. The war experience compelled Algerians to adopt a radical and principled foreign policy;
5. Hence, the country held a position of leadership in the Non-Aligned movement, the Organization of African Unity, the Arab League and other international organizations;
6. Algeria's privileged political and military relations with the former Soviet Union resulted in confrontation over regional and international concerns with the United States.

The Chadli Bendjedid regime, which succeeded Houari Boumediene's in 1979, was more pragmatic; the new regime adopted a much less radical foreign policy and initiated an all-out economic liberalization, without however altering its authoritarian nature. Although the reforms initiated after 1988 were promising, Algeria received little tangible assistance in promoting the liberalization process, especially at the political level. Furthermore, the United

States, for instance, did not perceive the rise of Islamism in Algeria as a threat to Western interests. This explains the ambiguous attitudes that many Western countries adopted toward Algeria during the “red decade.”

From 1992 until recently, Algeria’s position on the world scene went through roughly five phases, with the first three phases characterized by an isolation of Algeria. I will give only a brief summary of the first three phases, due to time limitation. However, they are important in contrasting those phases with the changes that occurred since 1999. I will concentrate more on the fourth and fifth phases, which have been rich in events and show the current position of Algeria in the international context.

Phase I: January-June 1992

- Cancellation of electoral process; banning of Islamic Salvation Front; proclamation of High Security Council headed by Mohammed Boudiaf.
 - Most countries uninvolved in Algerian crisis; cautious attitude; impartiality of the US; wait-and-see attitude; US not opposed to coming to power of “moderate Islamists”

Phase II: July 1992-November 1995

- Assassination of Boudiaf; Rise of terrorism; campaign of assassinations of intellectuals, policemen...
 - International community questioned chances of survival of Algerian regime; state lost control over many areas;
 - While some Western countries felt that they should save the regime from disintegrating, others felt that since the coming to power of Islamists was inescapable, they should be prepared for that possibility and should thus reach out to the Islamic Salvation Front;
 - US pushed for compromise between regime and moderate, non-violent Islamists;
 - Sant’Edigio meeting between Algerian parties, but regime refused to attend; US felt that Sant’Edigio was a good base for national reconciliation;
 - Pressure on Algeria to initiate reforms;
 - But no opposition to Algeria in IMF and other financial institutions;

Phase III: November 1995-September 1998

- Presidential election (Liamine Zeroual); institutional reforms: revision of Constitution, municipal & legislative elections;
 - International community encouraged by reforms; greater empathy toward regime in Algiers;
 - Large-scale massacres of civilians resulted in international community to seek internationalization of the Algerian crisis;
 - Visits of EU troika, UN panel...
 - Although regime exonerated from massacres...Algerian regime still isolated and lacking tangible outside support; US & EU required reforms and respect for human rights as conditions for support.

Phase IV: April 1999-September 2001

- Pluralist presidential election in April 1999; election had a bad start (withdrawal of six candidates) but soon new president undertook actions that answered some of the domestic and international concerns;
 - Bouteflika gained new legitimacy with Civil Concord and promise of bringing about reforms;
 - Decline of violence inspired hope;
 - Government objectives: restoration of civil peace and economic recovery;
 - Bouteflika successfully projected the image of a recovered Algeria and should regain the prestige it had once enjoyed on the world stage;

During this phase Algeria launched an aggressive diplomatic offensive aimed at achieving two major objectives: 1/ restoring the country’s image abroad and 2/ attracting foreign investment.

The return to the world stage needed to follow several concentric circles: the Maghreb; Africa; Europe (France, Spain, and Italy, in particular); and, the United States. Of course, Asia and Latin America were also important, as well as some international organizations, such as

NATO, in which Algeria had shunned in the past. I will provide a brief review of successes & failures in dealing with those areas:

The Arab Maghreb Union

This is the area of the greatest failure; despite attempts by Bouteflika to revive the UMA, the question of Western Sahara has remained one of the major obstacles to improvement in relations and to revival of the UMA. The cost of no Maghreb has been high for the Maghreb countries.

Although relations with Libya have improved, Libya's provocative policies in the Saharan areas have created tension between the two states. Relations with Tunisia have been very close and those with Mauritania have improved considerably.

Africa

The OAU summit in Algiers in July 1999 marked the return of Algeria to its prominent role in African affairs. The summit was the best illustration of Algeria breaking its isolation: 42 heads of states attended the gathering in Algiers. Algeria also revived its involvement in the resolution of conflicts in Africa. It was Algeria that mediated the ceasefire between Ethiopia and Eritrea in December 2000. Algerians also played a role in mediating conflicts in the Great Lakes region and in Mali.

The country contributes troops to peacekeeping operations in the continent.

Algeria also developed a close partnership with Nigeria and South Africa, which resulted in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) endorsed by the OAU in 2001. NEPAD figured in the G-8 summit in June 2002 in Alberta, Canada.

In addition to these activities in the area of socioeconomic development in the continent, Algeria has played an important role in obtaining African support in the struggle against international terrorism.

European Union & NATO

Algeria's relations with the European Union improved considerably since 2000; in December Algeria signed the association agreement in Brussels. Algeria sought the inclusion of a clause on cooperation against international terrorism; while the EU had refused to insert that clause in the association agreement, following the 9/11, the EU included a whole chapter on the fight against terrorism.

Until 2000, Algeria had basically been excluded from the Mediterranean dialogue that NATO had engaged with other Mediterranean countries.

Algeria's engagement in the Global War on Terrorism has resulted in its active involvement in NATO and other organizations. At the same time, Algeria's relations with most European countries improved considerably, especially with Spain and Italy, and even France (until the crisis of 2005).

In addition to improving relations with the West, Algeria also renewed the long friendship that it had with the former eastern bloc, especially with Russia, with which it signed a Strategic Partnership in April 2001. In 2006, Russia erased Algeria's debt in exchange for Algeria's purchase of military equipment amounting to 4.5 billion dollars.

Phase V: Algeria in the International Context after 9/11

The most notable development after 9/11 was the considerable improvement in US-Algerian relations. US-Algerian political relations had been mediocre at best; however, they witnessed an incredible development at all levels, including military and nuclear (civilian) cooperation. Algeria's cooperation with the US in the war on terrorism has been described remarkable. In fact, Algeria was a member of the Pan-Sahel Initiative initiated by the United States which has been replaced by the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership. Algeria's participation in such US-led security arrangements would have been inconceivable in a recent past. But, although it has entered such arrangements, Algeria has refused to host AFRICOM, the new African Command created by the US administration. Algerians are fearful that such command would result in the establishment of military bases on the continent.

While it has developed very good relations with the West, Algeria has also tried to diversify its relations, which explains not only the close relationship with Russia but also with China.

In the last few years, Algeria's role on the world stage has been rather conspicuous. The country has gone from being heavily indebted to repaying almost the totality of its international debt. It now holds more than 100 billion dollars from the oil revenues. The plan to spend more than 150 billion in the next five years to revamp its social and economic development has attracted hundreds of international companies. So much so that Gulf countries have started investing in Algeria. China has shown great interest in Algeria, as well, particularly in the economic and energy sectors. Algeria has even opened its market to Chinese labor.

The country has been active in promoting reforms of the United Nations institutions. It is working hard to join the World Trade Organization.

In the Mediterranean, Algeria is seeking to cooperate with the countries in the region in the energy sector, which I am sure, the Minister of Energy will discuss in his presentation.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Algeria has regained its place on the world stage. The relative domestic stability, the near-eradication of terrorism, high oil revenues, and a dynamic diplomacy account for such result. But for Algeria to keep its respectable status, it must carry out the necessary reforms domestically, diversify its economy, that is, not rely on hydrocarbon revenues (98%), fight corruption, and establish good governance. While efforts in those areas are being made, they remain insufficient at the moment.