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THE UNLIKELY ROLE OF THE ALGERIAN ARMY

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In a recent [interview on the Algerian state radio](#) Chaîne 3, Fatima Oussedik, one of Algeria's most respected sociologists, remarked that the people of Algeria had always respected the army as an institution even when they had disagreed with the manner in which its senior officers behaved. That remark not doubt surprised many foreign observers who like to argue that the Algerian army is "totally corrupt", that it "owns the country" and that predation is its only *modus operandi*. Reducing Algeria and this key institution to a cliché explains why most observers have failed to understand why the army has kept its truncheons sheathed since the start of the huge demonstrations which are now into their third month.

The former prime minister, Mouloud Hamrouche has pointed out that Algeria is one of three countries where the army predates the state – the other two are Israel and the United States. Its 500,000 men are drawn from every region and every social class. However humble his social origin, any Algerian can rise to the top. Officers are well educated, more some than is the case in Egypt. In that country, the army owns a sizeable share of the country's productive assets, not so in Algeria.

The legitimacy of the army is both historic and revolutionary in the sense that the Nation Liberation Army became the National Popular Army after it won independence from France, in 1962, after a bloody eight year struggle which brought about the collapse of the Fourth French Republic in 1958. This paved the return of General de Gaulle back to power.

As they survey their immediate regional environment, 43m Algerians and their army find few friends. Relations with the country's western neighbour, Morocco are frozen and the dispute over an internationally recognised legal status for the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara shows no sign of being solved. France remains Morocco's paramount ally.

To the south, Mali and Niger remain wracked by ethnic and social conflicts with any number players whose role and alliances mutate all the time. But the conflict in both countries, however severe, and albeit now expressed in a handy language of jihad that gives it global currency, is also about local grievances. Worryingly for the Algerian army, these conflicts have attracted new foreign actors to the region – the French army, US special forces and, more recently private Ukrainian and Russian armies.

To the east, Tunisia remains an essential buffer. Cooperation between the army and security forces of both countries is excellent. Algeria remains the key guarantor of this budding democracy's stability. Further east, the civil war in Libya presents a huge threat to Algeria and Tunisia. Senior Algerian officers did not appreciate that their warnings as to the likely consequences of the NATO backed western intervention in Libya were not heeded in Paris, London or Washington back in 2011. The attack of the Algerian gas field of In Amenas, in January 2013, by a group of jihadists who crossed over from Libya has not been forgotten. Algeria's long standing support for the Palestinians, its refusal to join the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, its good relations with Russia, Syria and Iran do little to commend it to right wingers in the West.

Every Algerian knows that the army is the guarantor of the peace in Africa's largest country which lies in the middle of a very troubled region. Every Algerian is acutely aware of the disastrous proxy wars being waged between Qatar and Turkey on one side, the Emirates and Saudi Arabia on the other. Franco-Italian rivalry in Libya adds another, unnecessary layer of confusion which only offers Russia leverage. That France should be shifting to General Haftar worries senior officials in Tunis and Algiers as it does some seasoned observers. Some senior French officials suggest the Algerians cannot be trusted but is turning a blind eye, if not encouraging, Gulf powers to play a greater role in Libya really in France's long term interests?

Millions of Algerians have marched, every Friday, for more than two months now, clamouring for democracy. No violence has occurred which in itself is remarkable in a country wracked by a violent civil war in the 1990s. Contrary to the view of many in Europe, violence is not a particularly Algerian pathology. The old divides of Kabyle Berbers versus Arabs and Islamists versus the rest no longer work, despite attempts by some groups in the security forces, to stage manage confrontations in the streets. The marchers are claiming their share of legitimacy alongside that of the army. An intense debate is going on inside the army which has two facets: the first is to build the institutional machinery to ensure free and fair elections; the second is to reassure outside powers that what is going on in Algeria will not upset the regional balance of power.

Senior officers are reaching out to France, the US, Russia, China and the UK. When a country is going through turmoil and thus weaker, outside powers are tempted to intervene. Most of Algeria's partners, not least France, which totally failed to guess what was coming, are deeply concerned. The less they intervene, the better but huge economic interests – notably in oil and gas, weapons, IT and other sectors, are at stake. A shuffling of the cards on the economic deck, especially if corruption charges are brought against some of the senior officials arrested recently, is inevitable.

Mouloud Hamrouche has pointed to the two keys for any successful transition to democracy in Algeria. First of all there must be a consensus on the way forward within the army. From the start of the demonstrations, its senior officers have, notably through the voice of its publication *El Djeich*, made clear they would support the people. The unity of the army must be maintained at all costs. Second, a meaningful debate must then be engaged between the army and the people. No easy task one is tempted to say but Algerian crowds have demonstrated again and again that they are politically savvy. They are very wary of manipulation and understand that their country has few foreign friends.

The story unfolding in Algeria has not yet fully played out but if moves towards a more rule-bound, outward looking and confident, not to say younger led, country consolidated in the months to come. The cliché of an army whose only purpose is predatory will be well and truly laid to rest. As Fatma Oussedik suggested in her talk, "Algeria acquired its territorial independence 1962. Now it has to build a modern state".