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ALGERIA'S FREEZE AND THE FUTURE OF THE MAGHREB

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Unsubstantiated rumours that Algeria was allowing food, fuel and weapons, let alone mercenaries to help an embattled Mouammar Gaddafi have surfaced repeatedly in western media in recent months. When the Arab League met on March 12th, no vote was taken regarding NATO's intention to enforce a no fly zone in western Libya. Algerian expressed no reservations, the only two countries which did were Syria and Mauritania. But, as the conflict developed, Algeria appeared increasingly wrong footed, including when, last month, it allowed members of Gaddafi's family who are subjected to a UN decreed travel ban to enter the country.

Six factors help to explain why Algeria has been rattled by recent events in Libya. First is the increasing visibility in Libya's Transitional Council of people who have, in the recent past been active in Islamist terrorist groups linked with al Qaeda, some of which operated in Algeria during the civil war in the 1990s, at the instigation of Muammar Gaddafi who was only too happy to make life even more difficult for his Algerian "brothers". Abdelhakim Bel Hadj, a former leader of an armed Islamic group in Libya regarded as an affiliate of al Qaeda chairs the Tripoli Military Council.

Second is the key role played by the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad Ben Khalifa Al Thani in encouraging the revolts in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya and arming the erstwhile "rebels" in Libya. The Sheikh's close links with the US and France, the role of *al Jazeera* as it sided openly with the rebellion in Benghazi, the huge influence an influential member of the global Muslim Brotherhood, Yusuf Qaradawi who issues fatwas on the satellite television channel which often suit US policy options have discomfited Algerian leaders – and one should add, a number of senior Tunisian officials. Even in Washington, some senior policy makers are scared by Qatari influence in the new Libya.

A third factor relates to Algeria's experiment with "fast track democracy" which went so badly wrong in 1989-1992. Pressing for free and fair elections quickly in countries which are going through an economic crisis (Tunisia) or/and have no previous experience in democratic elections, let alone an independent judiciary and a free press (Tunisia and Libya) is fraught with danger. Spain, Portugal and Greece succeeded a generation ago but with strong support from Europe and the US – a support the latter are unwilling to extend to southern rim Mediterranean countries

today. Its civil war cost Algeria enormous material destruction, an estimated 150,000 dead and the loss of 600,000 people, often well educated, who fled the country. Some of the same factors which sparked the revolts in Tunisia and Libya are present in Algeria: many desperate young people clamouring for jobs and dignity, widespread corruption and an older generation clinging to power. Yet few Algerians wish to revisit their recent past while many others hope and pray the lessons of their country will not yet come to haunt their neighbours...

A fourth factor needs to be taken into account. Algerian leaders live in a time warp, dreaming of the 1960s and 70s when their country was a surrogate for the revolutionary masses; a proxy for the revolutionary state and a model for the developing world. Whatever the country was going through had been overlaid with these visions and with these expectations. Yet the Algeria of those years did make a noteworthy contribution to genuine liberation movements as it trained ANC and PLO commandos. As history has moved on however and in virtual self parody, Algerian leaders have rattled on for so long in a meaningless, vacuous and monotonous idiom that they have ended up in splendid isolation, closeted, out of touch and with no one left to chat except themselves.

A fifth factor is at play. For a generation now, Colonel Gaddafi has exasperated the Algerian army and security forces – his mercurial ways and endless plotting across Africa and the Middle East have not endeared him to people who seem dour but are not unsophisticated. But they made a major mistake last spring in not anticipating that the coalition of forces (NATO plus Qatar led by France and Britain) intended to oust Gaddafi, not simply to protect the life of the inhabitants of Benghazi. Algeria's leaders are quite incapable of anticipating events these days – be they political or economic. Back in the spring they felt that if they did not keep Gaddafi sweet he would cause further trouble on Algeria's southern borders: for years now Algeria and Libya have been engaged in a bitter fight for the control of the desert – Mali and Niger being the proxies in this long drawn out battle and a myriad of groups which are al Qaeda one day or smugglers the next. In fact they are often impoverished Touareg nomads facing the prospect of their environment being destroyed by the likes of the French company Areva which is mining for uranium. Smuggling of illegal immigrants, of cocaine from Latin America to Europe, of weapons – a true flood is sweeping the Sahara now, are a daily reality in which western and North African secret services play a very murky role.

Algerian leaders no longer dream of promoting revolutions. They know that their country is an unhappy place where oil and gas wealth has not brought jobs; where the majority of the population is under 30 and, at best, scorns them. With the removal of one dictator, another falls through the trap. Algerian leaders buy social peace thanks to the country's \$200bn in hard currency reserves. But handouts are no substitute for a vision for the future which a turbulent younger generation, many of whom living on the black market, is desperately seeking.

The final factor is seldom mentioned but, in the minds of Algerian leaders weighs heavily. French leaders claim they intervened to stop Colonel Gaddafi from massacring the inhabitants of that Benghazi but the agenda included the toppling of the leader which has come at the price of taking from the initial Libyan uprising the popular and legitimate character its counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt had acquired. Algeria's leaders fear that the Libyan operation might be used as a template for a future intervention in their own country. Such fears seem far fetched but do not amount to paranoia .

However the dice rolls, decisions taken in Algiers and how events unfold on the ground in that country will have a decisive impact on the future of the Western Mediterranean. That future is, more than at any time since southern rim countries threw off the yoke of colonialism half a century ago, up for grabs.