

Algeria:

Between Democracy and Terrorism

Feb 5, 1998



Brief Analysis

Contrary to most media reportage, the constitutional crisis in Algeria in 1991-1992 was not the engine that ignited terrorism. Acts of terrorism by groups and individuals claiming to speak in the name of Islam began in the mid-1980s, when the Algerian government began exploring ways to implement economic reforms and allow for the formation of free non-political associations. Militant "Islamist" organizations were already organized by the time of the cancellation of the second round of parliamentary elections in January 1992. A key impetus in this effort came from "Algerian-Afghans," returnees from the anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan, who formed the core of the armed wing of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a fundamentalist umbrella organization. In June 1991, following the arrest of FIS's two main leaders, the organization launched an open confrontation against the government.

Radicalism, claiming to operate in the name of Islam, has thrived in Algeria on the frustration arising from poor living conditions and social injustice. This frustration led to a massive protest vote in the December 1991 legislative elections. The FIS success prompted President Benjadid to resign, creating an institutional vacuum that made the completion of the electoral process virtually impossible. The Islamist groups then launched a full-scale campaign of terror in Algeria and abroad. In Europe, the terrorists undertook attacks in France and ran networks for collecting money and smuggling weapons. In this effort, Algerian terrorist cells linked to Iran, Afghanistan, and Bosnia were identified in France, Italy, Belgium, Spain, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

The Government's Response

The operational goal of the terrorists is to isolate the Algerian government from the people, and the country from the outside world. To that end, the principal target of the terrorists for much of the last six years has been the civilian and military establishment, civil society associated with the regime, and foreign residents in Algeria. However, after a long campaign against the terrorists, one can state that the terrorists have lost; while terrorism remains a public safety threat, it is no longer a threat to national security or to the stability of the regime. Currently, terrorist attacks are mainly directed at "soft targets," namely civilians in outlying villages. While terrorists are sometimes still able to perpetrate terrible outrages, this shift in their targeting does represent the last vestiges of a broken and demoralized terrorist apparatus.

While Algeria remains the world's most active "front line state" against the threat of terrorism, the worst has passed. In recent months, a series of terrorist groups such as the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), the Islamic League of Jihad and Preaching, and the Islamic Front of Armed Jihad (FIDA) have announced that they have ended their terrorist actions. These developments have had a clarifying effect on the situation for now the only groups that publicly claim responsibility for terrorist attacks are those that fall under the umbrella of the Armed Islamic Group, an organization officially listed as a terrorist group by the U.S. State Department.

Algeria's response to terrorism has also included a committed effort to invigorate political life for all those groups that respect the constitution. To this end, Algeria has recently concluded a three-stage process of elections for

president, parliament and local government. For the first time in the country's history, all institutions have been elected by the people. The extent of popular participation in these elections is attested to by the high percentage of voters in the presidential election in 1995 and the high number of candidates-more than 80,000-who put themselves up for election in the 1997 municipal and provincial voting.

Iran's Role in Terrorism

Algeria had good relations with Iran after the revolution, to the extent that that was possible. Algeria served as a mediator during the hostage crisis, helping to obtain the release of the American hostages being held in the American embassy in Teheran. However, in March 1993, Algeria broke diplomatic relations with Iran because of the extensive role that Iran played in assisting the terrorists. It is certain that Iranian officials have been involved in supporting Algerian terrorists groups, even outside Iranian territory. Regarding current Iranian involvement in support of Algerian terrorism, it is important to keep in mind the basic truth of the Islamic republic: "Until the Islamic revolution prevails everywhere in the Muslim world, there can be just changes in tactics, not changes in strategy."

Economic Recovery

Algeria's economic policies, actively supported by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), are aimed at four key objectives:

- A sustained growth focused on job creation;
- The pursuit of financial stability, particularly through a reduction of inflation;
- An improvement in the balance of payments; and
- An improvement in the standards of living of the lower social groups.

These macro-economic policies are being implemented in the framework of a three-year program with the IMF and is supported by an Extended Fund Facility (EFF) and a Structural Adjustment Loan (SAL) from the World Bank. The effects of this program have led to an overall policy framework in favor of the private sector, including: restructuring and privatization of state-owned companies, deregulation of exchange rate policy, price liberalization, creation of a market-oriented mortgage system, and land ownership reform. Given the demand for employment and housing, the government also has made it a top priority to create 1.2 million jobs and stimulate the construction of 800,000 housing units between 1998 and 2000.

Misrepresentation and the West

Over the last six years, Western media has predominantly limited its coverage of Algeria to numbers of casualties and clichés such as "military-backed government versus Islamic insurgents." This misrepresentation has painted a distorted picture. Furthermore, there have been several articles developing baseless conspiracy theories and questioning the professionalism and dedication of the Algerian security forces. These accusations, however, have not merely been limited to the media; they have also been set forth by official statements of some Western governments. The weak and equivocal reaction of the West to the situation in Algeria has served the interests of the terrorists.

In Algeria's view, the premise behind the recent European Union fact-finding mission is problematic. Algeria is not a secretive nation; it is a signatory to numerous international nonproliferation and human rights treaties and has opened itself up to monitoring by appropriate organizations. The recent inquiry mission, however, falls under a completely different category; it is a politically motivated action premised on the faulty notion that the identity of the "killers" in Algeria is unclear. If the government were to accept the investigation, it would be a tacit acknowledgment that the GIA may not be responsible for the killings. The inquiry is also based on the false idea that Algeria suffers

from a nationwide breakdown of law order. Indeed, the sole intent of an international investigation is to delegitimize the elected institutions of Algeria. As a responsible government, the Algerian government will not cooperate in destroying its popularly elected institutions.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Eytan Fisch.

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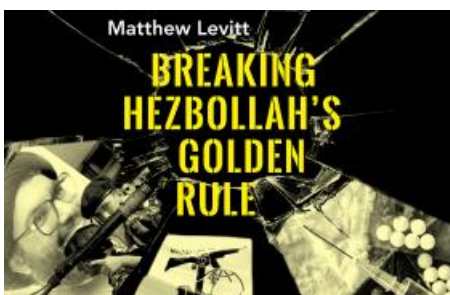
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