

# An Islamic Republic of Algeria?

## Implications for the Middle East and the West

Jun 1, 1995



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**T**he More than three years after Algeria's military-backed government annulled the results of the first round of parliamentary elections, the country remains locked in a bloody civil war with insurgents seeking to establish a sharia-based Islamic regime. While by no means assured, an Islamist takeover could occur in one of three ways: gradual Islamist ascendancy resulting from tactical compromise between Islamists and elements of the government; a sudden collapse of the regime, caused by the continuous strain on the military and security forces; and disintegration of the country into separate enclaves, with Islamists governing some areas and hard-line secularists and Berbers in control of others.

In all circumstances, an Islamist victory would have serious repercussions for North Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and U.S. interests in these areas. These repercussions would vary depending on the method of takeover, the speed of the government's collapse, and the extent of violence involved in the process. Moreover, the impact of an Islamist government would be affected by the success or failure of the new regime's effort to improve the Algerian economy so as to meet the needs of the poor and unemployed who comprise its main power base.

In general, the emergence of an Islamist regime in Algeria would have an effect similar to that of the Khomeini revolution in Iran in 1979, providing a tremendous boost to similar movements throughout the Middle East and the Islamic world. Algeria's new rulers are likely to provide moral, political, and at times material support to kindred movements that threaten the political stability of moderate, pro-Western Arab regimes (especially Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt), oppose the Arab-Israeli peace process and work to establish Islamist regimes in sub-Saharan Africa. Depending on the solidity of the regime in Algiers, Islamist rulers feeling threatened could participate directly in terrorist or other military ventures in Europe, the Middle East, or beyond.

In addition to the immediate repercussions on its neighboring North African states, an Islamist takeover in Algeria would have a significant impact on European security. Not only would southern Europe -- especially France -- face large-scale immigration of Algerian intellectuals and other secularists, but the victory of Algerian Islamists could deepen rifts within Europe's existing Muslim communities. Moreover, growing European economic interests in Algeria could be targeted should the Islamists not succeed in providing an economic windfall for their supporters.

Depending on circumstances, an Islamist Algeria could adversely affect U.S. interests in the unhindered flow of oil and gas, the Arab-Israeli peace process, the security of pro-West Arab and African moderates, nonproliferation, counter-terrorism, and human rights. Responding to this challenge would involve one of three options: accommodation, containment, and rollback. Given current political and military realities, a policy of "active containment" -- implemented in concert with European, Asian, and Middle Eastern allies -- would offer the best way to ensure that Islamist rulers in Algeria do not flout the rules and norms of acceptable international behavior.

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