

Algerian Politics: Outlook and Regional Implications

Sep 14, 1994



Brief Analysis

On September 14, 1994, Amb. Mary Ann Casey, who just finished a tour as U.S. ambassador to Algeria, and Dr. Gideon Gera, the Meyerhoff Fellow at The Washington Institute, addressed The Institute's Policy Forum on the prospects and implications of a potential Islamic takeover in Algeria. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their off-the-record remarks.

AMBASSADOR MARY ANN CASEY

Precarious Circumstances in Algeria

The United States is concerned about the unstable domestic situation in Algeria. Algerian government efforts at crushing the insurgency have failed and the cycle of political violence fueled by opposition forces continues. The violent uprising stems from frustrations attributed to political exclusion, economic misery, and a feeling of social injustice.

Since the suspension of the electoral process in January 1992, violence between the regime's military forces and the armed insurgents has increased. Two groups at the helm of the opposition forces include the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) and GIA (Armed Islamic Group). Unlike the FIS, the GIA opposes negotiations with the military government. In the past twelve months, the GIA has been responsible for over sixty fatal attacks, and the strength and public support of the FIS is on the rise.

Repression of the Islamic revolutionaries by the military has not succeeded in stymieing their movement. The Algerian government needs to broaden the political base through inclusion and dialogue with opposition groups, including non-violent and Islamist opposition, because a solely military response to the conflict does not appear feasible.

Goals of U.S. Policy

The U.S. prescription for Algerian stability must take into account the desires and needs of the Algerian people. In this respect, the United States has maintained consistent policy goals. First, Washington supports the development of democracy. The constitution of Algeria provides the blueprint for a sound democracy that includes elections and popular participation, as well as the creation of democratic institutions such as a strong presidency and an independent judiciary to consolidate the democratization process. A policy that facilitates an early return to the electoral process is necessary. Second, the United States believes in the need for long-term economic reforms. And finally, the United States seeks to guard against human rights violations.

DR. GIDEON GERA

Islamic takeover scenarios

For purposes of analysis, it is assumed that a victory by the Islamic movement is inevitable. Initial post-revolutionary euphoria would likely result in anti-Western sentiment and a build-up of military forces. This would

probably be followed by a pragmatic period of consolidation. Another likelihood is the failure of the Islamic regime's economic program, which would result in lashing out at foreign enemies. Every scenario shares common domestic consequences, including large-scale emigration, internal power struggles and purges, and the need for economic consolidation. Furthermore, the triumph of radical Islam in Algeria will affect incumbent Arab regimes in the surrounding region. The only prospect for restraining the Islamists is through economic measures, because Algeria is highly dependent on oil exports, which account for nearly 90 percent of export earnings.

Regional Impacts

- Maghreb. Due to the different forms of nationalism, a "domino effect" spurred by an Islamic takeover of Algeria is unlikely to lead to further Islamic revolutions in the surrounding countries. Morocco maintains control over its domestic militants, but Islamist rule in Algeria could increase border tensions. Although fundamentalists in Tunisia and Libya have ties with the FIS, spill-over of the revolution remains unlikely.

- Middle East. Egypt's strong state tradition and experienced government will prevent an Algerian-influenced Islamist takeover. Egypt is concerned, however, by the soft U.S. attitude on Islamist activity in Algeria. In Saudi Arabia, events in Algeria could boost opposition to the government and possibly affect the Saudis' foreign relations with the Western community.

The Arab-Israeli peace process is of secondary importance to the Algerian Islamists, but increased verbal opposition would be expected. Another method of opposing the peace process could be through violent means. Terrorism against Jewish targets in France, for example, would be one way to punish both the French and Israeli governments for their hostility to Islamic radical movements.

- Europe. Europe is close to Algeria and has a growing and combustible Muslim population. The scope of accommodation with the Islamists after a takeover depends on the French attitude. Past support of the FLN among France's Algerian population may affect policies aimed at solving domestic problems that could result from a FIS victory, such as mass emigration from Algeria leading to a backlash from the French right; increased agitation among the Islamists, secularists, and refugee groups in France; and increased terrorism.

- United States. The main interest in Algeria is strategic, not economic. The United States is uncompromising in its opposition to violence, because the turmoil could upset positive trends in the peace process and the Gulf States.

U.S. Policy Options

Western influence in Algeria is limited. There is little the United States could do to prevent an Islamist takeover or affect a post-revolutionary government. Pragmatic moves by either side should be encouraged through rewards (e.g., economic incentives) instead of attempting to coerce through threats or sanctions. Containing Islamist expansion and strengthening friends and allies may preclude "self-fulfilling prophecies of doom."

This special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Shira Vickar. ❖

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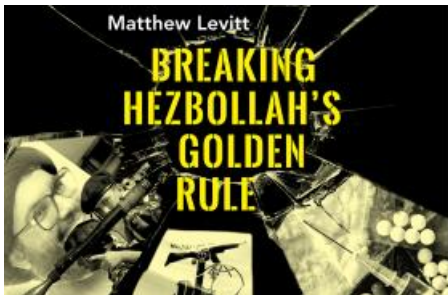
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