

Gaïd Salah and the Future of the Algerian Army

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Brief Analysis

As the question of succession dominates public concerns in Algeria, divisions between Algerian President Bouteflika's supporters and opponents have deepened among political, military, administrative, and economic elites. Intractable political conflicts resulting from the inability to decide over who holds the power of veto for succession have characterized the fourth term of the ailing President. Most notably, this power struggle has manifested itself in the internal politics of Algeria's armed forces.

Multiple dismissals and changes within the army and its ranks have raised the question of whether these deep shifts reflect civil-military reform or a military power grab in anticipation of next April's presidential elections. The fact that these changes are now a matter of heated discussion after a fourth term otherwise free of any serious political debate is a positive side effect of the 2019 presidential election. However, discussion is just the first step towards a possible leadership transition in next year's elections, following a prolonged slump in Algerian politics. According to many observers, Algerians are apathetic about elections in general, since they always expect the army will select the winner.

Indeed, in a [survey \(http://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Algeria_Public_Opinion_Survey_2016.pdf\)](http://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Algeria_Public_Opinion_Survey_2016.pdf) conducted by the Arab Barometer last year, 83 percent of Algerians said they are either not interested or not at all interested in politics, compared with only 4 percent who say they are very interested. Meanwhile, three-quarters of the Algerian population continues to trust the armed forces significantly more than any other political institution, which helps explain why the Algerian public is particularly interested in shifts within the Algerian army. Although many Algerians remain uncertain about the nature of these changes, they understand that whoever emerges victorious from this power struggle (known as Siraa Al-Ajniha) will bring the major change they are looking for.

Up until 1999, when President Bouteflika took office, Algeria's fate resided in the hands of a group of generals who controlled most aspects of the Algerian political system. The Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS), the Algerian secret service, played a decisive role in shaping the political landscape in Algeria, including designating future presidents. However, once in office, President Bouteflika maneuvered to reduce the power of influential generals by reassembling and restructuring the army and intelligence services. The President's [2015 removal \(https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/world/africa/algerian-president-removes-feared-intelligence-](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/world/africa/algerian-president-removes-feared-intelligence-)

[chief.html](#)) of General Mohamed “Toufik” Mediene as head of the DRS turned it into a tailpiece of the presidency. Yet, the President's deteriorating health has created the potential for a reverse to this rollback of military power.

In the past few years, the army has replaced the DRS as the main interlocutor between the presidential faction and the broader military apparatus. General Ahmed Gaid Salah, Army Chief of Staff and de facto defense minister, has become a strongman figure in Algeria, exercising more influence over the government than any other faction in the regime. In light of the president's deteriorating health, Salah's increasing authority has frightened other factions, especially the presidential faction and the pro-regime businessmen, led by the President's younger brother, Saïd Bouteflika. The result is a power struggle between these two groups; while General Gaid Salah and the Bouteflikas are allies, disagreement over the choice of the next president has provoked both discord and competition that threatens to end their partnership.

Tensions between the presidential and army factions have manifested themselves in a variety of ways, including the [sacking \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/8/15/bouteflika-sacks-algerias-pm-after-less-than-three-months\)](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/8/15/bouteflika-sacks-algerias-pm-after-less-than-three-months) of Prime Minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune, Gaïd Salah's preferred candidate, which weakened Gaïd Salah's position with respect to the presidential faction and showed him incapable of saving his inside man within the regime. Salah presented no public reaction to Tebboune's dismissal.

However, it is Gaïd Salah's own internal firings that are most illustrative of political shifts in Algeria. As part of his strategy to drum up support within the army, Salah has intensified his visits to different military regions, overseeing numerous military drills, including both naval and air force exercises, to consolidate substantial backing among key military figures in anticipation of the post-Bouteflika military scramble. Gaïd Salah has also moved forward to eliminate supporters of the presidential faction within the army.

On May 29, special forces from the Algerian Navy [discovered \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/algeria-summer-scandal-abdelghani-hamel-sacked-abdelaziz-bouteflika-investigation-ship-cocaine-339586284\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/algeria-summer-scandal-abdelghani-hamel-sacked-abdelaziz-bouteflika-investigation-ship-cocaine-339586284) and seized 701kg of cocaine in the western Algerian port of Oran. The national police's investigation of the seizure found that the “personal driver” of Abdelghani Hamel, head of General Direction for National Security (DGSN), had been implicated. Salah's growing pressure on Hamel - seen as the presidential faction's preferred candidate to succeed Bouteflika next year - pushed President Bouteflika to dismiss Hamel.

During the two months following this incident, Gaïd Salah introduced sweeping army reforms, removing a number of powerful generals in order to assert his dominance and restructure the ranks. The "purge" included Major General Habib Chentouf, removed because of his son's [implication \(https://www.algeriatoday.info/pourquoi-le-president-a-limoge-le-general-major-habib-chentouf/\)](https://www.algeriatoday.info/pourquoi-le-president-a-limoge-le-general-major-habib-chentouf/) in the cocaine affair. Equally significant was the [dismissal \(https://www.elwatan.com/edition/actualite/nouveaux-limogeages-au-sein-de-larmee-23-08-2018\)](https://www.elwatan.com/edition/actualite/nouveaux-limogeages-au-sein-de-larmee-23-08-2018) of Mohamed Tireche, Head of the Direction of Security Services (DCSA), on August 23, responsible for the investigation of the Oran cocaine seizure. This dismissal exposed the need to re-enforce the role of the DCSA, which [replaced \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-security-idUSKCN0V31PU\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-security-idUSKCN0V31PU) the DRS after the latter was dissolved by Bouteflika in 2016. The DCSA is in charge of investigations, the processing of information from other security services, and field interventions in the fight against terrorism within the Algerian army.

Gaïd Salah's high-level changes coincided with President Bouteflika's [travel \(https://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFL8N1VI4RJ\)](https://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFL8N1VI4RJ) to Geneva for medical tests, indicating his intention to solidify his power base as the de facto Defense Minister in anticipation of the April 2019 elections, using the President's medical situation to his own advantage. Prior to that, following Hamel's dismissal, other significant changes [occurred on July 4 \(http://www.lematinalgerie.com/gendarmerie-nationale-le-general-major-menad-nouba-est-remplace-par-le-ghali-belekcir\)](http://www.lematinalgerie.com/gendarmerie-nationale-le-general-major-menad-nouba-est-remplace-par-le-ghali-belekcir) and involved the Commander of the National Gendarmerie, Major-General Menad Nouba, who had also been implicated in the cocaine scandal that shook the high spheres of the

Algerian Army. Major General Mokdad Benziane, Human Resources Manager in the Department of National Defense, and Boudouaour Boudjemaâ, Chief Financial Officer at the Department of National Defense, were also **dismissed** (<https://www.alg24.net/alerte-bouteflika-generaux-mokdad-boudouaouer/>).

Though these dismissals are directly linked to the Oran cocaine scandal, subsequent firings were linked to the political situation of the country, namely in preparation for the presidential election next year. This included firing or transferring of **Military Chiefs** (<https://www.elwatan.com/edition/actualite/le-dernier-ete-des-generaux-26-08-2018>) of the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th regions: Saïd El Bey, Saïd Chengriha, and Cherif Abderrazak, respectively.

Although Gaïd Salah portrayed "the purge" as a professionalization of the ranks, many analysts have emphasized the unprecedented nature of its scope, describing it as the largest military restructuring since Algerian independence in 1954. Security analyst **Saïd Rabia** (<https://www.djazairess.com/fr/elwatan/1145072>) stated: "No army in the world makes changes as abrupt and massive as those implemented within the Algerian military." The fact that the generals were advanced in age cannot be credited as an excuse, since their replacements are, for the most part, similarly aged. Rather, such abrupt changes over a short period in an army as large as Algeria's suggests it is just the type of repositioning common within the Algerian political system before any presidential election.

Given the current level of fragmentation and power struggle between the ruling factions, it is questionable whether the present system will be able to agree on a presidential candidate. Indeed, the current political trajectory under Bouteflika makes this scenario unlikely both in the near and mid-term. General Salah's purge may have laid the conditions for a peaceful transition, since the army is the backbone of the regime. Meanwhile, history shows the army has always successfully led transitions in Algeria, which explains why it is considered the most trusted institution in the country. Yet the outcome of this trial of force will result in a new balance of competing groups that will impact Algeria's future. There has been a number of indications suggesting that Gaïd Salah will "chop off more heads" of other senior military officers to prevent resistance among "skeptical people within the army." At this point, political blockage rather than consensus will most likely define the coming months preceding next year's election. ❖

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