

Dismissal of Algerian Intelligence Chief: A New Phase in Algerian History?

by [Yacine Boudhane \(/experts/yacine-boudhane-0\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Yacine Boudhane \(/experts/yacine-boudhane-0\)](#)

Yacine Boudhane is an Algerian journalist.



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General Toufik's departure could end the contest of wills between the intelligence and political leadership, but Algeria's democratic transition will likely remain on the back burner amid dire economic and security concerns.

The September 13 decision to oust former Algerian intelligence head Lt. Gen. Mohamed Mediene, known by his alias "General Toufik," sent shock waves through Algeria. Algerian politicians and the media are now debating the implications of this dismissal and its causes.

Today, the most prominent question in the Algerian political scene remains how President Bouteflika was able to sign the retirement referral decision of a figure who, before that date, was considered a "president maker" and the "lord of Algeria" due to his sway, influence, and control over the reins of power in the country. Even after Algerian media broadcast the news that President Bouteflika had referred General Toufik for retirement, stunned Algerians were hesitant to accept that it was true until a presidential statement put an end to the state of uncertainty and confusion.

Algerians were taken aback with the dismissal of the "General" because of the aura he enjoyed. Since he took over the intelligence service, one of Algeria's strongest and most fearsome security services, he neither appeared in the media nor made any public statements for over a quarter of a century. Algerians do not even know what he looks like since only one poor-quality picture has ever emerged of him.

Until very recently, Algerians believed that General Toufik appointed presidents and ministers, choosing whomever he wanted to assume various critical posts in the country. It was thought that no one could be appointed to any government post unless he received the blessings of Toufik's intelligence service, known as the "DRS."

Algerians wonder how Bouteflika managed to put an end to Toufik's influence while in a state of ill health that prevents him from appearing before the public or addressing the Algerian people. Bouteflika said during his first term in 1999 that he would not agree to be a third-term president and that he would restore all state constitutional

powers. However, he did not manage to achieve this throughout his fifteen-year presidential period while in full health, so the government's movement against Toufik is even more remarkable.

Yet several indicators demonstrated that Toufik's influence recently began to decline. The first sign was a letter by Hussein Maltese, former deputy head of the oil company Sonatrach, published in the Algerian French-language daily *El Watan*. In this letter, Maltese described Toufik as the "Lord of Algeria," and challenged him with unveiling the rampant corruption in Sonatrach and the Italian company ENI's Algerian branch. This marked the first time that someone publicly attacked the intelligence chief. Even more shocking was the letter's appearance in an Algerian newspaper.

The second indicator followed President Bouteflika's return from his treatment trip at the Val-de-Grace military hospital in France in June 2013. Upon his return, he enacted a resolution appending a group of intelligence departments to the chief of staff, weakening Toufik's control over intelligence.

On the eve of the presidential election, the secretary-general of the National Liberation Front -- Bouteflika's party, which maintains a parliamentary majority -- launched an unprecedented attack against Toufik, claiming that the general failed to perform his duties. These statements caused a wave of unprecedented controversy and opened a new chapter in the relationship between the presidency and intelligence institutions, built on the conflict surrounding Bouteflika's potential candidacy for a fourth term. Saadani's statements went unpunished, more evidence that Toufik's control was in decline.

The fourth and strongest indicator was the prosecution and August 26 incarceration of Abdelkader Ait-Ouarabi, or "General Hassan." Hassan was the intelligence commander in charge of the counterterrorism file. This was the latest in a series of actions aimed at weakening the intelligence service after most of its departments were appended to the chief of staff and many of its chiefs referred to retirement.

Thus, the decision to refer General Toufik for retirement was an expected culmination of recent events suggesting the weakening of his status and that of the intelligence service in general. Nevertheless, the resignation had the effect of lightning on Algerians and the political class, which remains in a state of confusion and is dealing cautiously with this change.

The questions currently occupying Algerians are: What will happen after Toufik's ousting? Why was he dismissed? Is the issue linked, as rumored, to a settling of accounts after Toufik opposed Bouteflika's candidacy for a fourth term, and after his intelligence service unveiled corruption files involving figures close to Bouteflika, such as former Minister of Energy Chakib Khelil? Are foreign countries, especially France, playing a role in the issue, especially since the decision came a few days after French Senate President Gerard Larcher's visit to Algeria?

Figures close to the government, mainly Saadani and Ahmed Ouyahia, director of the Office of the Presidency of the Republic, assert that these changes in the intelligence sector fall within the framework of modernizing political life and aim to end that sector's influential role in the political scene. However, Algerian citizens and political elites alike are skeptical about the issue and believe that it is linked to a clash of interests and influence over control of the country.

Several hypotheses have been presented as alternatives to the view that Toufik left due to conflict with the presidency. The general may have requested retirement himself by virtue of his old age and amid talks about his potential inability to manage the intelligence apparatus due to sickness. A meeting held between senior intelligence officers at intelligence headquarters in the presence of Toufik and the new head, General Athmane Tartag, implies that the resignation went smoothly and was achieved through consensus between the various parties.

On the other hand, Toufik may have surrendered to the inevitable after being stripped of his men and seeing his influence weaken. In this case, the presidential wing may have put an end to the fluctuating government structure

that has characterized Algeria since its independence, where military and civilian elements of the government have vied for more power from the other branch.

Moreover, the shift away from the influence of the intelligence community cannot be separated from the influence of foreign countries, particularly France. The French government seeks to preserve its interests in Algeria in the face of fierce U.S. competition, especially its interests in the energy sectors.

Now Algerians wonder whether Toufik's departure will save the country from the multiple crises afflicting it. Most important, Algeria suffers from the threat of an economy debilitated because of falling oil prices in global markets, since it relies on its oil export revenues to provide 98 percent of its economic support.

It should be emphasized that Toufik is not the only figure responsible for Algeria's fragile political, social, and economic situation. Instead he is part of the political and military regime that has ruled the country since its independence. Therefore, his departure does not constitute a major shift in the government system that brought the country to a state of paralysis in all sectors.

Nevertheless, Toufik's departure does present Algeria with a golden opportunity to achieve a smooth democratic transition in the new absence of a conflict of wills at the top of the pyramid of power. In the foreseeable future, the country may witness the unveiling of a new draft of the constitution with amendments and implications for potentially deep changes in several sovereign institutions.

This is a critical stage for Algeria, in light of the serious economic and security challenges the country faces locally and regionally. Therefore, maintaining the stability of both security and sovereign institutions is essential in order to avoid any repercussions that may contribute to the deepening of the complex crisis plaguing the country, which postpones Algeria's democratic transition to an unknown point in the future.

Yacine Boudhane is an Algerian journalist. This article was originally published on the [Fikra Forum website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=7766\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=7766). ❖

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