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NOVEMBER
2014

THE RE-EMERGENCE OF ALGERIA

Francis Ghilès, Senior Research Fellow, CIDOB

Algeria spent much of the 1990s fighting its own insurgency after free elections that nearly brought the Islamists to power were cancelled by the army, acting with the support of millions of men and women who were adamant they did not want to live under charia law. The brutal civil war which followed forced over half a million Algerians to flee their country and turned Africa's largest country into a place the West often shunned. From black sheep Algeria has turned into a country every western counter terrorist expert likes to exchange views with. The manner in which Arab revolts have, with the exception of neighbouring Tunisia, turned sour since January 2011 has also helped some observers understanding the process of democratisation in the Middle East and North Africa was going to be a long and arduous affair. The failure of Algeria's attempt to open up its political and economic system a quarter of a century ago was a warning signal that few of those who gushed with enthusiasm for the fast track democratisation they believed was about to happen in Egypt and Libya cared to heed.

The fall from power of President Ben Ali in Tunisia nearly four years ago was followed by the collapse of the Libyan regime and the take over of northern Mali by Jihadist fighters which provoked a French military intervention. Yet it was the attack by the same Jihadist groups at the In Amenas gas field which lies close to the Algerian frontier with Libya which acted as a the wake up call for Algerian leaders.

Algeria's diplomacy has certainly become much more active and its diplomats have managed to improve their country's messaging and surface appeal. Senior army officers and diplomats, many of whom had long standing knowledge of the region have become more active players in their own backyard. The response has been two-pronged: military and diplomatic. It has been encouraged by the US and certain European countries but many Algerians, be they at street level or senior officials are worry of the motivations of the West's new found support for a country long viewed as a black sheep. Algeria was not simply shunned for the role its security forces played in the crackdown against Islamist groups, some of whom were funded by Gulf and Saudi funds, but because of the active support it had afforded the South African ANC and the Palestinian PLO in the aftermath of independence in 1962.

The geopolitical map of the world has however completely changed since Algeria gained its independence from France in 1962. The Cold War is over, Algeria no longer is a revolutionary power but in the politics and diplomacy of North Africa and beyond, its voice carries weight after many years of self effacement. The country's diplomacy is articulated by a highly professional minister of Foreign Affairs, Ramtane Lamamri and plays an active role in trying to reconcile the warring Mali factions. Whether Algeria has any real truck in Libya remains to be seen but the priority on the country's eastern frontiers with Tunisia and Libya has been one of security. Military levers here have included planes, drones, electrified fences. It has meant working closely with the Tunisian armed forces to hunt down Islamist extremists in the Chambi Mountains which sit on both sides of Tunisia's western hinterland and two years of Islamist government in that country left on the lose.

Further South it has meant raids into Libyan territory, probably much deeper than the Algerian military high command would care to admit. Indeed, with two exceptions since independence, one of which sending military aid to President Nasser of Egypt in June 1967, the Algerian army has held to a strict doctrine of non-intervention in foreign, particularly neighbouring countries. The attack on In Amenas forced a – relative – change in doctrine. Indeed protecting the country's oil and gas wealth was paramount. Not only have the two international companies which operated at In Amenas – Statoil and BP, returned but Shell and Statoil jointly won a bid to explore the rich Timissit gas and condensates basin which abuts the frontier with Libya last autumn. Major international companies agree with US and British military experts that the Algerian army has done a good job.

The Algerian army has meanwhile stepped up its purchase of weapons abroad, notably from Germany but remains weary of the former colonial power, France. A major debate is taking place in the Algerian media today: why buy a tank manufacturing plant from Germany when Algeria will never get the authorisation from the manufacturers to export some of the tanks it will produce and which it will not need? Why not follow German suggestions and get the manufacturer to build a tank maintenance plant instead? Decisions on such important issues are not just made by the president Abdelaziz Bouteflika and the Chief of Staff, General Ahmed Gaïa Saleh: senior officers debate such issues, strictly behind closed doors. For all its rigid hierarchy, the Algerian army is no stranger to collective decision making. This is all the more important because professional soldiers and officers are drawn from all regions and classes. They more accurately reflect this country than many other institutions.

Many Algerians are also wary of becoming the gendarmes of Western nations, not least the US in the region. They know their country will face great political uncertainty after an ailing President Bouteflika leaves the stage. They know that the fall in oil prices will show up the lack of a well articulated economic policy which has failed to create desperately needed jobs. A policy of simply throwing money at social problems has its limits. Nobody better articulates these questions than the Prime Minister who led the bold economic and political reforms between 1989 and 1991, Mouloud Hamrouche, himself a former army officer.

Caution suggests that daring military forays beyond the borders of Algeria are less important, in the longer run, than playing the honest broker in a complex political transition which is underway and whose aim should be to improve the economic and political governance of Africa's largest country, ensure that more Algerians who are under 30 years of age, account for the majority of the population and are better educated than their elders, find decent jobs. In recent years, Algeria has diversified its trading partners more than ever before: Spanish, German and Turkish companies are increasingly active in trading and investment. A less corrupt Algeria where prosperity is more evenly shared among classes and generations and where genuine private enterprise prospers would be the best anchor for long term stability in the region. No one appreciates that better than Algeria's senior army officers.