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Algeria Under Bouteflika

Civil Strife and National
Reconciliation

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Algerians no longer live in fear of being killed by radical Islamists at *faux barrages* (makeshift roadblocks) or of being “disappeared” by “ninjas” — hooded policemen who break down front doors and take occupants away, never to return. This is a remarkable achievement in a country that during the 1990s was synonymous with horrendous violence perpetrated both by Islamist radicals and by security forces. Algeria has regained stability, with radical Islamism no longer a fundamental threat to security across the country. The virtual quarantine in which the country was confined during the mid-1990s has been lifted. It is also increasingly opening up to foreign investment. Algerians have enjoyed a period of peace and relative prosperity, despite occasional flare-ups of violence. During the presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who took office in 1999, Algeria has transitioned from civil war, state failure, and moral decay to stability.

This paper describes how Bouteflika devised and implemented a successful peace plan that gave hope to millions of despairing Algerians, including moderate Islamists. But it also shows how the government effort to hasten peace undermined the chance for reconciliation. The peace process included an arsenal of new laws, a struggle to demilitarize Algerian politics for the first time since independence, and the acceptance of moderate Islamist groups as legitimate political actors. But it also granted broad amnesty to “warriors of God” who agreed to disarm, without investigating the crimes they had committed, and it never held security forces accountable for *their* abuses. As a result, many Algerians, particularly relatives of the disappeared and other victims of violence, remain deeply dissatisfied. National reconciliation has not yet taken place. Genuine reconciliation is not a question of taking administrative steps to implement decisions made by the few, imposing them from the top down; rather, it is a long process that would engage the entire social fabric, with all its political groups and institutions.¹

From Democratic Opening to Civil Strife

Less than three years before the bloody conflict began, Algeria appeared to experience a great democratic breakthrough seen as unique in the Arab world. In February 1989, after more than two decades of one-party rule under the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, FLN), the Algerian government opened the political system overnight in response to riots that had occurred the previous October.

These riots initially were not particularly violent, nor were they driven by clear-cut political demands. Rather, they were caused by a build-up of

resentment at what Algerians call *la hogra* (literally, “contempt”), the brutal disregard for citizens exhibited by officials at all levels of government. This resentment was and remains central to the crisis in the relationship between the Algerian state and society.²

The rioters, born in the post-colonial era and mostly between the ages of 18 and 25, called for the resignation of all officials whom they felt had betrayed the promises of independence. A strong but inchoate desire for political change animated them. Unlike Egyptians, Saudis, and Moroccans, Algerians had been brought up on an ideology of egalitarianism and social justice; every Algerian felt entitled to the full dignity of a citizen and full enjoyment of the state largesse.

The government’s response to the riots was brutal. The army, once the symbol of the glorious war for independence and closely identified with the state after independence was won, turned its guns on Algerians for the first time. Five hundred people were killed, and many more injured—a very high toll for what Communications Minister Ali Ammar called a *chabut de gamins* (children’s uproar). The umbilical cord connecting Algerians and the state-army was violently severed. The authorities clearly signaled that they would not tolerate challenges to the political structure and the system of privilege and patronage on which it was grounded. Thus the 1988 riots severely damaged the legitimacy of the Algerian state forged in the revolution, and opened up a Pandora’s Box.

Although it had been willing to use force, the government soon concluded that repression alone would not stabilize the country and that political change was necessary. After much internal debate, in February 1989 the authorities issued a new constitution that ended the political monopoly of the FLN, with article 40 permitting the creation of “associations of a political character.” The article stipulated that “this right cannot be used to violate the fundamental liberties, the fundamental values and components of the national identity, national unity, [or] the security and integrity of the national territory . . . Political parties cannot be founded on religious, linguistic, racial, gender, corporatist or regional bases.” Despite these safeguards of national unity, the government licensed all parties that applied, including an Islamist party that equated democracy with heresy (*kofr*).

More than thirty new political parties rapidly appeared and municipal and national elections were quickly scheduled. Algeria seemingly became “the most free, most pluralistic, and most enthusiastic defender of democracy in the Arab world,” wrote William Quandt.³ The Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS) soon proved itself the best organized and most effective opposition party, bringing together a broad coalition of radical Islamists, veterans of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, students, urban businessmen, and unemployed youth. Campaigning under the slogan “Neither National Charter nor Constitution; Islam Is the Solution,” the FIS scored significant victories in the 1990 municipal elections.

In the first round of national legislative elections in late 1991, the FIS captured 188 of 430 seats, though not an absolute majority. And although it garnered 1 million fewer votes than in the municipal elections, the FIS still received twice as many as the ruling FLN. The Front of Socialist Forces (FSS) came in a distant third. The crushing victory of the FIS took everybody by surprise, including the organization's leaders.

The government, however, was not ready to accept the democratic verdict for fundamental changes in state and society. It swiftly put an end to the political opening. On January 4, 1992, a presidential decree suspended the National People's Assembly, and a week later President Chadli Bendjedid resigned under pressure from the military high command. A five-member Higher State Council (an institution not provided for by the Constitution), chaired by Mohamed Boudiaf, a founder of the FLN, assumed control of the country. The council suspended the second round of national legislative elections (required since no party had won a majority in the first round) and banned the FIS.

The government also imposed an array of measures restricting civil liberties, under a state of emergency that was decreed for one year but is still in effect today, sixteen years later. Some 18,000 people were interned in nine camps in the Sahara, among them elected FIS politicians, activists, and other members of the party. Algeria's first experiment with democracy thus ended in a "constitutional coup d'état," as the FFS's president charged. Supporters of the military intervention justified it on the grounds that the FIS could not be trusted to uphold democratic principles because Islam and democracy are incompatible. The slogan "One person, one vote, one time" expressed that fear. For such opponents, the rise of an Islamic fundamentalist state would represent enormous regression, in political, moral, and cultural terms.

Things Fall Apart

The military takeover, the ban on the FIS, and subsequent competing attempts by the government to crush all radical Islamist groups and by Islamists to demonstrate their continuing strength, led to a decade of violent clashes between security forces and armed Islamist bands. The cycle of terrorism and repression stoked tensions that dated back to the national liberation struggle, and left Algerian society internally conflicted and deeply traumatized.

At the core of the insurgency were four groups: the Armed Islamic Movement (Mouvement Islamique Armé, MIA); the Islamic Salvation Army (Armée Islamique du Salut, AIS, the armed wing of the FIS); the Armed Islamic Group (Groupe Islamique Armée, GIA); and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, GSPC). Detailed information on the armed militants is scarce and unreliable, but the total number of "warriors of God" was estimated at 27,000 in 1993.⁴

The movement launched a fierce campaign against the government, the military, and civilians, particularly intellectuals and journalists. It also carried out violent acts abroad, mainly in France, in a bid to hurt trade and damage the Algerian economy while drawing the world's attention to the Islamist struggle in Algeria.⁵ The military responded with extreme brutality. Civilians were frequently caught in the middle, and were used as pawns by all sides. Losses were enormous, with some 150,000 people killed, 7,000 to 10,000 missing, and 1 million displaced, and damage to the infrastructure estimated at \$20 billion.

The authorities and the insurgents seemed to take turns escalating the violence. In 1993 the GIA expanded its terror campaign, beginning with systematic assassinations of secular intellectuals, journalists, and senior government figures and moving on to attacks against foreign citizens to gain international attention. In response, the government rapidly unified the military and the security services under a single command, so as to wage "total war" against the armed Islamist groups, and it made some headway in breaking them up. Against this background of escalating violence, an attempt by the FIS, the FLN and the FFS parties—which together had received 80 percent of the vote in 1991—to negotiate a common platform at a meeting sponsored by the Sant'Egidio Christian lay community in Rome in January 1995 was unsuccessful.

Algeria's terrorist groups splintered and multiplied during the conflict. The GSPC was formed in 1998 by breakaway fighters of the GIA, and support from abroad. The violence increased the resentment and frustration that had accumulated among Algerians beginning as far back as the national liberation struggle.

According to General Muhammad Lamari, head of the military high-staff, "the worst period was the spring of 1994, when the GIA and to a lesser extent the AIS started attacking economic and military targets." In 1995, however, the military mounted an all-out effort to "make fear change sides," that is, to make the Islamists as fearful as they had previously made the rest of society.

The ultimate goal was to eradicate the FIS and all groups associated with it by both infiltrating them and crushing them militarily. Islamists initially were convinced that they could easily defeat the better armed and trained but "corrupt" army by enticing young recruits to desert, making it impossible for the military to withstand a lengthy war of attrition. The security forces, however, adapted their tactics and weakened the armed groups considerably without suffering heavy losses. The military leadership maintained a strict security-first strategy that they termed "la politique tout sécuritaire." At the same time, to sap the insurgents' support, the government promised that fighters who surrendered would not be punished, but reintegrated into society.

Amid the violence and mayhem, the Algerian leadership insisted on maintaining a façade of democracy by holding elections regularly. Power was in the hands of the military and the security forces, but the electoral process was not interrupted, following the pattern Andreas Schedler has called electoral authoritarianism. The military did not reinstate the single-party system of old, but

allowed a degree of pluralist competition. Most surprising, it allowed a variety of Islamist parties to continue operating, and went so far as to encourage the creation of new ones. At the same time, it pursued negotiations with the armed groups even as it strove to crush them by military means. This course of action was extremely controversial, and the political class became bitterly divided. *Eradicateurs* were determined to use repression to eradicate the radical Islamists, while *conciliateurs* believed in dialogue with political Islam and, ultimately, in the necessity of national reconciliation.

Attempts to negotiate with the FIS took place throughout the period. President Lamine Zeroual, who had become president in January 1994 after the disbanding of the Higher State Council, tried to reach a political deal with the FIS in October of that year. His vague policy of “dialogue with all political forces without exception” failed rapidly, however. Negotiations were then resumed by the military, with Major General Smaïn Lamari, head of the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS), and the AIS’s Madani Mezrag as the chief interlocutors. Lamari’s political stature lent credibility to the negotiations, reassuring Mezrag that an agreement would be respected. With the FIS considerably weakened by the war waged against it, negotiations led to a truce on September 21, 1997. The details of the agreement have never been made public, but Mezrag issued a communiqué ordering all insurgents under his command to halt combat from October 1st and urging other groups to follow suit. An estimated 3,000 militants obeyed the order, including many from the GIA, who were not under Mezrag’s command. But many more armed militants refused to comply, demonstrating that the FIS leadership had little control.

Violence continued for several more years, with the Islamic militants degenerating rapidly from members of organized political groups into bands of common criminals and bandits.

Hundreds of civilians died horrific deaths in massacres in villages outside Algiers in July and August 1997 and December 1997 and January 1998. Although the government blamed the Islamists, Algerian security forces were widely suspected of having done the killing. The massacres made headlines around the world, and many foreign governments and international human rights groups condemned Algeria. The country’s isolation persisted for several years, abating only after the government began cooperating in the fight against international terrorism in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States. Overnight, Algeria achieved international legitimacy because of its willingness to fight terrorism.

By early 2000 the Algerian government could claim that the once-widespread terrorist attacks that had plunged the country into turmoil for a decade had been reduced to “residual violence.” General Mohamed Touati, considered the author of the military’s strategy against the insurgents, felt confident enough to declare that “the danger of Algeria’s Talibanisation is far removed, even though serious handicaps persist.”⁶

Origins of the Peace Plan

The truce between the government and at least some of the militants was not immediately followed by a political process of reconciliation and normalization. That began in earnest only after the 1999 presidential election that brought Abdelaziz Bouteflika to power.

Bouteflika, who easily won the April 1999 election after the other candidates withdrew, was an established figure in Algerian politics. Appointed minister of foreign affairs in 1964, he had hoped to replace Houari Boumediène as president when Boumediène died in 1979. The army decreed otherwise, choosing Colonel Chadli Bendjedid and forcing Bouteflika out of the political arena. After spending a few years abroad, Bouteflika returned to Algeria in 1987 and joined the FLN's Central Committee. When President Liamine Zeroual announced his intention to resign, Bouteflika entered the fray, with the backing of the military. He broke taboos during the campaign, speaking in the Algerian dialect and discussing openly the casualties of terrorism. The official estimate for victims of the civil strife thus increased from 26,563 in February 1998 to 100,000 before the presidential election, and finally to 150,000 during Bouteflika's presidency.

More critically, Bouteflika declared himself willing to strike a deal with the Islamists so as to bring peace and stability to the country. From the outset of his campaign, he put national reconciliation at the center of his political program: "I am determined to make peace, and I am prepared to die for it," he declared.⁷ That emphasis helped him gain popularity, but in the end his electoral appeal was not tested. The other six presidential candidates abruptly withdrew and endorsed Bouteflika. Lack of competition assured Bouteflika's election, but it also undermined his legitimacy.

The president immediately turned his attention to the legal and political resolution of the domestic conflict. In July 1999 he introduced in the National People's Assembly the Civil Harmony Law, which he defined as "the political expression" of the agreement between the military high command and the AIS.⁸ The peace plan laid out in the law was submitted to a referendum in September 1999 and was overwhelmingly endorsed by voters. According to the official figures, 98.6 percent voted yes, with turnout at 85 percent. While those figures are undoubtedly inflated, it is certain that Algerians were more than ready for an end to the violence and that they supported the peace plan. The law was also approved unanimously, with little debate, by both the National Assembly and the Senate. Bouteflika's legitimacy, flimsy after the uncontested election, was strengthened.

The Civil Harmony Law granted conditional amnesty to radical Islamists who surrendered and renounced violence before January 13, 2000—a mere four months away. Islamist insurgents were eligible for amnesty if they fully disclosed their past, so long as they had not caused death or permanent injury

to others, committed rape, or used explosives in places frequented by the public. Insurgents who had committed any of those crimes would receive reduced sentences but not full amnesty. But in practice, serious crimes were seldom investigated and amnesty was granted indiscriminately.

Even before the approval of the peace plan in the referendum, an executive order of July 1999 set up probation committees in each province to determine whether individuals who surrendered were eligible for amnesty and to define the terms of their probation. Each committee was headed by a general prosecutor, usually a representative of the security forces. The committees functioned without transparency or public accountability, raising suspicions that they waved applicants through, accepting all statements at face value. Not surprisingly, most applicants claimed that they had never participated in terrorist acts, but had merely tracked the movement of security forces or just cooked for the Islamists.

Three days before the deadline for applying for the Civil Harmony amnesty, Bouteflika announced the *grâce amnistiante* (pardon with the force of amnesty). An executive decree purportedly extended the amnesty to a select list of armed Islamists who had agreed to lay down their arms and disband. But the list was never made public, and many people, including members of the Islamic Salvation Army and the Islamic League for Preaching and Holy War, benefited from total amnesty without any investigation of their activities. The decree stirred up a storm of protest among the families of the disappeared and human rights groups. The blanket pardon, they argued, contradicted the Civil Harmony Law, which had precluded general amnesty for those involved in violence and terrorist acts. It was also blatantly unjust, because it allowed some people guilty of serious crimes to go free, while many who had been captured and sentenced in the early 1990s for lesser crimes continued serving life sentences.⁹

The Question of the Disappeared

None of the decisions taken by Bouteflika addressed the issue of disappeared people in a manner that satisfied most Algerians. The president was anxious to bury the subject with as little discussion as possible. But the public, together with domestic and international human rights groups, refused to accept the official position that the majority of disappearances either were perpetrated by Islamists disguised as members of security forces or were voluntary disappearances by guilty individuals seeking to avoid justice. The families of the approximately 10,000 disappeared Algerians gradually overcame their fears, formed associations, and began holding weekly public sit-ins. They demanded information on the fate of the missing and insisted that “truth must precede reconciliation.”

With the credibility of his peace plan at stake, in September 2003 Bouteflika appointed a 43-member National Consultative Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights to determine the fate of those who had gone

missing during the conflict. However, he made it clear that this “ad hoc” commission “must not be conceived of as a commission of investigation that would take the place of the appropriate administrative and judicial authorities.”¹⁰ The commission has no statutory power to compel testimony by government officials or to force them to release documents.

Despite the establishment of the commission, the government continued to prevaricate about the security forces’ role in the disappearances. In February 2004, Bouteflika publicly declared that the state must accept responsibility for the actions of security agents in the struggle against terrorism. In March 2005, attorney Farouk Ksentini, the commission’s president, announced the completion of a preliminary report that concluded, after examination of more than 6,000 disappearance cases, that some elements of the security forces had acted “unlawfully” in abducting people. Yet the report was never made public, and Ksentini himself continued to evince the greatest ambiguity.¹¹ Security forces fighting a “dirty war” were probably “responsible but not guilty” for a number of reported disappearances, but they had acted as individuals, he believed. The state had failed to assure the security of the disappeared, said Ksentini, but it had not ordered the disappearances. And though elements of the security forces had unquestionably committed abuses in the struggle against terrorism, it was impossible to investigate each case individually because of the anarchy that had prevailed in that period. “We found no document, no testimony showing that the state institutions had given instructions,” Ksentini stated. Under the circumstances, he concluded, financial compensation was the best solution. Families of the disappeared were made eligible for up to 1 million Algerian dinars (approximately U.S. \$13,000) if they could produce a death certificate stating that the disappeared person “was killed in a skirmish or implicated in terrorist activity,” a document difficult to produce for people who have disappeared.

In December 2006 Bouteflika issued a decree renewing the commission’s mandate, although the panel had done little to advance the cause of truth and justice. Ksentini was renamed president of the commission. In September 2007, Djamel Ould Abbas, minister of national solidarity, definitively closed the file on disappeared people.¹² He announced that the commission had scrutinized 13,541 applications for compensation, both from families of terrorists and families of the disappeared.¹³ Total financial compensation, however, did not exceed \$50 million; by comparison, Algiers’s Great Mosque will cost at least \$3 billion. None of the commission’s reports was made public. In the minds of most Algerians, the dossier is far from closed.

A Charter for Amnesia

Despite the controversy surrounding the application of the Civil Harmony law, subsequent decrees, and the commission supposed to rule on the fate of the disappeared, Bouteflika remained convinced that he could promote na-

tional reconciliation while blocking any real attempt to investigate the events of the “red decade” and to hold perpetrators of serious human rights abuses accountable. Thus, while half-heartedly dealing with the problem of the disappeared, the government focused on convincing Algerians to move on without looking back.

The president started his push for reconciliation with a July 2005 speech. “To get our country out of the deadly crisis, Algerians must support national reconciliation through a referendum,” he declared. “I call on all Algerian men and women to learn again how to live together and join forces to improve their condition and achieve prosperity for their loved ones.” In August Bouteflika issued a decree containing a “Draft Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation.” This charter, approved in a referendum a month later, reflected the president’s determination to bury the past as quickly as possible, without any discussion. Symptomatic of the pretense that the country was united and determined to move on, the government announced that an improbable 97 percent of voters had approved the charter in the referendum.

The guiding idea of the charter was that there should be neither winners nor losers. Bouteflika’s charter exempted all individuals, whether Islamist insurgents, civilian auxiliary forces, or security forces, from prosecution for crimes committed during the civil strife. In the process of “national reconciliation” highlighted by the charter’s name, residual violence would end and the exploitation of Islam for political purposes would be banned. Islam would be excluded from the field of political competition and partisan antagonisms. The charter was also designed to halt speculation and attempts to discredit the army, as Bouteflika declared in his campaign for a “yes” vote in the referendum.

The charter essentially restated the principles of the Civil Harmony Law. It called for amnesty for Islamist insurgents, except those who had participated in massacres, rapes, and bombings in public places. It also called for an end to judicial proceedings against Islamist insurgents, including those who had sought refuge abroad and had been convicted in absentia. However, it excluded from political life anyone who had committed acts of terrorism or manipulated Islam for political purposes, as stipulated in its article 26. Citing this article, Interior Minister Noureddine Yazid Zerhouni refused to register a new political party, the Movement for Freedom and Social Justice, proposed in January 2007 by Anouar Haddam, a former FIS official living in the United States.

Following the pattern of avoiding public discussion of the issues that had torn the country apart for ten years, the government approved the “Decree Implementing the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation” on February 27, 2006, while the parliament was in recess. A notable feature of this decree is a provision that makes it a criminal offense to speak of the disappearances in such a way as “to undermine the good reputation of [state] agents who honorably served the country or to tarnish the image of Algeria internationally.” Furthermore, article 46 of the decree stipulates that “anyone who, by speech,

writing, or any other act, uses or exploits the wounds of the national tragedy to harm the institutions of the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria” or to say much of anything negative about it or its officials “will be punished by three to five years in prison and a fine of 250,000 to 500,000 Algerian dinars.” These penalties are doubled for a second offense. As many critics pointed out, this article of the charter runs counter to article 36 of the constitution, which grants freedom of speech to Algerians. Finally, article 47 of the decree empowers the Algerian president to take any measures he deems necessary to implement the peace program—a seemingly unnecessary measure since ten previous decrees had already been enacted to enable the implementation of the peace program.

Not surprisingly, the charter was unanimously condemned by major international human rights groups. The International Federation for Human Rights, the International Centre for Transitional Justice, and the International Commission of Jurists stated that the decree consecrates impunity for actions considered crimes under international law, and that it would silence public debate on the Algerian crisis. “Respect for and protection of fundamental human rights cannot be subject to a majority vote,” these groups argued.

Bouteflika aptly summed up his goal for Algeria as moving the nation from “truth and reconciliation” to “amnesty and amnesia.” He has used decrees and referendums to circumvent the airing of the issues in parliament, granted amnesty so courts cannot investigate crimes, and elevating the charter to the status of a sacred text. Under Algerian law, a person can criticize the Koran, but not the charter. Bouteflika’s approach raises a host of legal and ethical questions. It also raises a fundamental political one: whether a reconciliation driven from the top can possibly succeed—and thus whether the Algerian state can overcome the profound legitimacy crisis into which it was plunged by the civil war.

The Balance Sheet

Algeria is much better off today than when Bouteflika took office in 1999, and its people are again living almost normal lives. While many problems remain, the peace is holding despite scattered violent incidents; the military and the security forces no longer completely control the country. Thanks to Bouteflika’s diplomatic efforts and his cooperation with European countries and the United States in combating terrorism, Algeria is no longer an international pariah. Uncertainties remain, however, about the long-term stability of a country that has tried to bury its past.

Decreasing Violence

The decrease in violence is due to three developments: the killing by security forces of a large number of Islamists over the years; the surrender of many others when amnesty was announced; and the decision of a considerable number to leave the country and join the insurgents in Iraq or terrorist groups in

Europe. But precise information on all these matters is still lacking. From the outset, the security dossier in Algeria has been controlled by a very few people within the military-bureaucratic establishment, and even the president has kept his distance from it. Although Algeria's political trajectory will be defined for years to come by the legacy of the civil war, total opacity continues on the crucial issues, as human rights groups have pointed out with concern.

The available figures on the number of insurgents who surrendered or obtained amnesty are incomplete and contradictory. Considering the one estimate of 27,000 total insurgents, the following data on their post-conflict fate are surely very partial. For example, Ministry of Justice officials told Human Rights Watch in June 2005 that the total number of beneficiaries of the Civil Harmony Law was somewhat more than 5,500, of whom about 330 were serving reduced sentences for violent crimes. Government officials have also reported that approximately 4,000 insurgents surrendered from 1995 to 1998 under the law initiated by President Zeroual. In November 2006, Interior Minister Yazid Zerhouni declared at a press conference that "80 percent of the terrorists" had surrendered their arms,¹⁴ but did not provide a number. Aziz Mérouane, who supervises the implementation of the national reconciliation charter, claimed that 17,000 terrorists had laid down their arms by July 2007,¹⁵ but Algerian and French press reports suggested that, at most, between 2,000 and 3,000 AIS militants had surrendered so far. The numbers do not add up to a clear picture. What is certain is that Algerians did not witness Islamists lining up to surrender to officials. Most of the 27,000 probably chose instead to return quietly to their homes and their civilian lives.

The number of deaths is equally murky. In 2006 the government acknowledged that 17,000 Islamists were killed during the conflict. Even if the figure is correct, however, it is impossible to know how many of those killed were truly armed Islamist fighters, as opposed to innocent civilians caught in the crossfire. The number of security and military personnel killed is still a state secret.

There are indications that some of the insurgents have left the country to continue their activities in Iraq and elsewhere. In 2003 the Algerian government estimated that between 600 and 1,000 Algerians were active in transnational terrorist networks.¹⁶ Many are said to have ended up in Iraq, where Algerians may have constituted 20 percent of the foreign suicide bombers, according to an Associated Press report of August 2005.¹⁷ Some of these were probably behind the assassination of two Algerian diplomats in Iraq in July 2005.

As a result of the deaths, surrenders, and moves to other countries, the GIA, notorious for the use of violence against civilians, ceased to exist after 2004, and the GSPC has been greatly reduced. Still, a hard core continues to operate, as the new wave of terrorist acts in 2007 showed. Algerians are very much divided over the reasons. Bouteflika tends to dismiss the violence as *banditisme* with no ideological basis. "Terrorist acts are still committed from time to time. Such acts are due to organized crime. They have no ideological content," he

claimed.¹⁸ Others argue that the so-called residual terrorism is the work of the GSPC, which recently formed an alliance with al-Qaeda and rebranded itself as “Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb.” This new group claimed responsibility for the unexpected resurgence of terrorist activity in 2007, which targeted officials, including President Bouteflika, and security forces. A large segment of the public believes that the residual violence provides a convenient cover for illegal economic activities, as well as an excuse for the government to extend the state of emergency.

Restoring Civilian Power

When Algeria’s military chiefs threw their support behind Bouteflika’s candidacy in 1999, they could not have imagined how quickly they would come to regret the decision. Bouteflika has waged a struggle on all fronts to sever the traditional link between the government and the military that was created when the country became independent.

To recall, army and state in Algeria have been tightly enmeshed. The National People’s Army (Armée Nationale Populaire, ANP) is the direct successor of the National Liberation Army, the armed wing of the FLN, which fought French colonial occupation from 1954 to 1962. Many in the ANP genuinely felt that they had a legitimate role to play in the economic and political reconstruction of the country upon independence, and that the army should rightfully remain the principal locus of power in politics. Indeed, when the war of liberation ended, the army emerged as the only organized group and took over the colonial state apparatus without any serious opposition. From the beginning, the main features of the Algerian state were overwhelming control by a repressive apparatus and a weak civil society. Bouteflika, an FLN scout and later the administrative secretary of the FLN’s commander, Boumediène, was a key figure in the emergence of this state. First, he participated in the forging of the politico-military alliance on the eve of independence, then he helped to engineer the 1965 coup that deposed Ahmed Ben Bella, independent Algeria’s first elected president. The armed forces quickly established their centrality by installing high-ranking officers in government posts and by exerting influence over policy.

Bouteflika, however, then became involved in an effort to reduce the power of the major military power brokers, and this cost him his chance of succeeding Boumediène in 1979. The military high command, surprisingly, co-opted Colonel Chadli Benjedid, a relatively unknown figure with no apparent political ambition and no experience in state affairs, who ultimately reigned as president for thirteen years. Bouteflika became one of the first victims of Benjedid’s campaign to get rid of Boumediène’s men and establish his own control. Forced into exile by the generals, Bouteflika nursed a grudge against the military high command that had forced him into exile.

The security forces canceled the first attempt to return power to a civilian government, in 1992, as previously discussed. In 1999, having decided it was

time for a civilian president, they maneuvered to get Bouteflika elected, believing that in exchange for their ending his exile and making him president he would do their bidding. Far from showing gratitude, Bouteflika showed toughness. He devoted much of his first presidential term to consolidating his power, appointing personal friends and political allies to top posts in the ministries and regional institutions (but keeping the defense portfolio for himself). Like Bouteflika, most of these associates came from the western part of the country.

As both commander in chief of the armed forces and defense minister, Bouteflika gradually replaced senior officers with people loyal to him and reduced the military's political role. The April 2004 elections demonstrated that he had largely succeeded.¹⁹ Declaring, "Gone is the time when the military institutions, for considerations of stability and national cohesion, intervened in the political game," Chief of Staff Lt. General Muhammad Lamari announced that the army would not even have a preferred candidate in the presidential elections.²⁰ Bouteflika was re-elected, retained the defense portfolio, and quickly appointed new commanders for all military regions. He also issued a presidential decree creating the position of general secretary within the Ministry of Defense, which helped him consolidate his dominance over the military apparatus. Finally, in August 2004 Bouteflika forced Lamari to resign as chief of staff, replacing him with retired General Ahmed Salah Gaid, a close friend and ally. Lamari had been a major figure in the decision to cancel the 1992 elections, as well as an advocate of tough measures against the radical Islamist groups and a critic of Bouteflika's Civil Harmony Law and of the peace plan in general. With his departure, Bouteflika was finally able to reestablish the defense ministry's control over the armed forces.

Bouteflika has succeeded in reducing the army's role in politics, but his authority does not extend to the security services.²¹ The exigencies of the anti-terrorism campaign led to the expansion of the activities and personnel of the Department of Counter-Espionage and Internal Security within the DRS. And according to Belaïd Abdesselam, known as the father of Algerian industrialization under Houari Boumediène and former head of government (1992–1993), the blessing of the intelligence service is still crucial for anyone who would hold public office.²² The DRS has considerable influence over the choice of government ministers and ambassadors, and over voter rolls, and it maintains surveillance of political and intellectual figures while manipulating political parties and the public and private media. "The DRS remains at the heart of power, without constitutional oversight and with unlimited resources," says Saïd Sadi, president of the opposition political party Rally for Culture and Democracy.²³ Thanks in part to the U.S.-led global "war on terror," which has legitimized the deployment of security forces throughout Algeria, the security apparatus has strengthened its political power. In the final analysis, Bouteflika has only partially succeeded in his battle to restore civilian power.

Algeria and the International Community

Algeria's international standing has improved dramatically during the Bouteflika presidency, because of the declining internal violence and, above all, because of the president's relentless diplomatic efforts. As foreign minister (1964–1978), Bouteflika used his diplomatic skills astutely to win Algeria international legitimacy and support, especially from France and the United States. As president, he made forty trips abroad during his first years in office, including major visits to Italy, Canada, the United States, Great Britain, China, Vietnam, and various Persian Gulf states. Critics contended that most of the trips were not justified by any diplomatic necessity, but the president saw them as important in convincing foreign governments that Algeria was a reliable ally in the war on terror, and in attracting foreign investors. Shortly after his election he made an attempt to normalize relations with Israel, and played host to the annual summit of the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union), which automatically made him the presiding officer of the organization for the following year. In that capacity, he helped negotiate a cease-fire in the border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea and became one of the principal movers behind the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).²⁴

After September 11, Bouteflika quickly repositioned Algeria as an ally of the United States and Europe in the war on terror. In return, the Bush administration agreed to sell Algeria military technology, such as night-vision equipment, for use against armed Islamic groups. In a broader international sense, the world no longer regards the Algerian crisis as "France's problem."

The kidnapping of 32 European tourists by the GSPC in early 2003 led Washington to fix on Algeria as its new strategic ally in the region in the Maghreb. In 2004, U.S. Special Forces came to southern Algeria to train, equip, and aid national forces in fighting the GSPC. The Algerian army subsequently participated in various military maneuvers organized by the U.S. Army and NATO. Algeria was also integrated into the Pan-Sahel Initiative, which has become the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative. U.S.-Algerian security cooperation has gone a long way toward ending the isolation of the 1990s, and in resolving the difficulties that characterize Algeria's relationship with France. Algeria was one area in the war on terror where U.S. and French interests clearly converged, even when Paris and Washington exchanged barbs over Iraq. Ironically, Algeria under Bouteflika has become part of the "axis of good" in the new geo-strategic environment. According to diplomatic sources, Algeria has hosted a U.S. presence sheltering oil equipment in the southern Tamanrasset region, though leaders from both countries have repeatedly denied it.²⁵ Algeria has, however, ruled out hosting the U.S. Defense Department's planned Africa Command, known as AFRICOM.

No Reconciliation Without Truth

Despite his political and diplomatic successes, Bouteflika has largely failed in his proclaimed goal of bringing about national reconciliation. The families of the disappeared are incensed by the government's unwillingness to investigate and assign responsibility for the disappearances, and by what can be seen as a callous attempt to pacify them simply by throwing money at the problem. Victims of other abuses, including the women who were raped, are angered by the government's decision to grant amnesty on a large scale without investigating responsibility. Civil rights activists are outraged by the government's attempt to cut short all discussion of what really happened in the "red decade" and by its failure to set up any investigative mechanisms like those created in other countries with troubled pasts.

Major decisions on how to deal with reconciliation in Algeria were promulgated by presidential decree, confirmed by hastily called referendums, but never submitted to open debate in parliament. And Bouteflika's peace and reconciliation efforts included no mechanisms to establish the truth about the violence and those who committed and abetted it, although such mechanisms have become routine in post-conflict countries. For example, South Africa established its Truth and Reconciliation Commission to throw light on the dark events of the apartheid years. Argentina established a Disappeared People's Commission, and Morocco set up the Equity and Reconciliation Commission. An independent structure in Algeria like those in South Africa and Argentina could have provided a forum in which victims of abuse were heard, and the perpetrators of violence testified in exchange for amnesty from prosecution.

A vast body of scholarly work and practical experience shows that reconciliation is impossible until people learn what happened, so they can come to terms with it. But Algerian officials, led by President Bouteflika, decided to ignore the experience of other countries, to grant blanket amnesty and to pacify victims' families with money rather than information, in hopes of turning the page on a dark period of Algerian history as soon as possible. That haste merely postpones a crisis that is likely to break out in the future as unreconciled grievances from the decade of civil war become enmeshed in growing socioeconomic and identity tensions in the country. Then the prospects for reconciliation and the reinforcement of human rights in Algeria will become even dimmer.

Notes

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3. William Quandt, *Between Ballots and Bullets: Algeria's Transition from Authoritarianism* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 5.
4. Kamel Labidi, "Amnesia is the Price of Algerian Peace and Reconciliation," *Daily Star*, April 1, 2006.
5. Rachid Tlemçani, "Islamism in France: The French Have to Blame Themselves," *Middle East Quarterly*, September 1996.
6. Luis Martinez, "Why the Violence in Algeria?" in Michael Bonner, Megan Reif, and Mark Tessler, eds., *Islam, Democracy and the State in Algeria: Lessons for the Western Mediterranean and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2005), 15.
7. *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no. 4141, August 5, 1999.
8. Speech by President Bouteflika, July 9, 1999.
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10. See Bouteflika's speech introducing the ad hoc commission, on September 14, 2003, as translated by Human Rights Watch, *ibid.*
11. This section draws on a report based on interviews with Ksentini: Human Rights Watch, *Impunity in the Name of Reconciliation*.
12. *Le Jeune Indépendant*, September 26, 2006.
13. See Djamel Ould Abbas's press conference, *El Moudjahid*, September 28, 2007.
14. *Liberté*, November 2, 2006.
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16. Commission des Recours des Réfugiés, *La situation sécuritaire en Algérie*, 5, <http://www.Commission.refugies.fr>.
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20. *Le Matin*, January 15, 2004.
21. Hugh Roberts, *Demilitarizing Algeria*, Carnegie Paper no. 86 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2007), 15.
22. Interview with Belaïd Abdesselam, *El Watan*, August 1, 2007.
23. *El Watan*, October 8, 2005.
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