



ALGERIA

Quick Facts

Population: 40,969,443 (July 2017 est.)
Area: 2,381,741 sq km
Ethnic Groups: Arab-Berber 99%, European less than 1%
Government Type: Presidential republic
GDP (official exchange rate): \$175.5 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated April 2018)

INTRODUCTION

Algeria declared its independence from France in 1962. Since then, Islamist parties and armed groups have made up the major opposition to successive Algerian governments. Between 1991 and 1999, civil strife between violent Islamist extremists and security forces plagued Algeria and claimed over 150,000 lives. The majority of those killed were civilians. Despite the brutality of that conflict, conservative Islamism still holds appeal for many in Algeria. The Algerian government's attempts at reconciliation in 1999 and again in 2005 have aided the decline of violent extremist groups but have unwittingly legitimated and empowered political Islamism. Both Islamism and Salafist Islam rose in the Algerian political sphere, with Islamist parties multiplying and gaining parliamentary seats in national elections. While these parties have of late declined in stature and appeal, as evidenced by their dwindling power and dismal electoral results, Islamist ideas and underlying social conservatism nonetheless remain widespread throughout the country.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The exact numbers of armed Islamist militants operating in any country are difficult to discern. Algeria is no different, and estimates vary from around 300 and 1,000.¹ Many of these militants shift their affiliation between more established groups and splinter groups in the region—of which al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is one of the most significant.

GSPC/AQIM

The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria was a militant organization that focused on waging jihad against the Algerian government and trying to implement sharia there.² In 2006, the GSPC merged with al-Qaeda and in 2007, it renamed itself al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). AQIM follows GSPC's basic tenet of resisting the Algerian government, but now as a part of al-Qaeda's

global network rather than a solely domestic organization.³ Since the rise of the so-called Islamic State in 2013, AQIM has competed with it for influence in the Maghreb-Sahel region. However, AQIM has retained its hegemony in the area.

AQIM is primarily concentrated in the ethnically Kabylie region in northeastern Algeria (where the GSPC originally established its headquarters), and in the Algerian desert along the Sahara-Sahel in northern Mali. However, the Algerian government's successful attacks there have compelled AQIM to move into Algeria's southern territory, before eventually settling in northern Mali. The operations of Algerian security forces have greatly reduced the number of fighters in the north of the country. However, AQIM's sporadic attacks continued despite this pressure.⁴ The most important such attack occurred in January 2013, when AQIM militants attacked the In Amenas gas plant in southern Algeria. The group had entered the country through Libya, which has faced civil war since 2014. The attack resulted in the death of 40 staff members (mostly foreigners) of the gas plant and at least 29 militants.⁵ AQIM assassinations of police and military officers likewise have been ongoing.⁶

By 2013, the number of victims of terrorism from disparate armed groups had decreased substantially, with 30 to 40 a month—a considerable drop from the 1990s, when the number had reached 1,000 per month.⁷ In 2015, 62 terrorist attacks took place, resulting in several dozen victims.⁸ Security forces were quite successful in 2016 as they neutralized 350 terrorists, of whom 125 killed and 225 arrested.⁹ Generally, Algerian security forces do not reveal the names of the groups that carry out these terrorists attacks; both AQIM and the so-called Islamic State have claimed responsibility for some of their operations. Other, smaller armed groups also claim responsibility for the sporadic attacks, but it is not clear how realistic the existence of these groups is. With the exception of AQIM, the current extremist groups operating in Algeria have limited means, no popular support, and little impact.

In 2017, dozens of Algerian militants surrendered in the south and southeast of Algeria after fleeing northern Mali, Niger, and Libya. The military neutralized 161- armed insurgents, of whom 91 killed, 40 arrested, while 30 surrendered. The authorities arrested 214 individuals for supporting terrorist groups, as well as 19 arms smugglers. They also arrested 549 narco-traffickers.¹⁰ A high-level security source in Algeria revealed to the newspaper *Elkhabar* that the militants belonged to a variety of groups, not solely AQIM. Some of those whom Algerian criminal courts or courts in Mali and Niger had sentenced to death in absentia on charges of arms smuggling or of belonging to armed criminal groups.¹¹

AQIM receives considerable amounts of money from drug trafficking.¹² Thus, although AQIM does not traffic drugs directly, it provides safe passage for smugglers through the desert. It also provides protection to the drug traffickers in exchange for large sums of money. AQIM has also provided storage facilities for drugs in exchange for payment.¹³ However, AQIM also has connections with weapons trafficking, and in the past, some instances of kidnapping for ransom. It is common for terrorist groups to pursue multiple forms of illicit income: "Activities of terrorists and organized criminals frequently reinforce each other, where terrorists engage either directly or indirectly in organized crime activities such as trafficking, smuggling, extortion, kidnapping for ransom and the illicit trade of natural resources, for financial and/or material benefits."¹⁴

An analysis of the security situation in Algeria indicates that the threat of AQIM has diminished inside Algeria, in large part due to the security forces' efforts. However, the threat of AQIM and other jihadist groups operating at Algeria's southern borders remains as potent as ever and represents great concern for various countries in and outside the Sahel region. The communiqués of the Ministry of Defense are primary indicators of the considerable decline of terrorism in the country. The head of AQIM, Abdel-Malek Droukdel, who operated out of the mountains of Kabylia for more than 15 years, has allegedly fled to neighboring Tunisia¹⁵ to avoid death or capture in Algeria. Further-

more, most of the militants arrested in recent years are well over thirty-years old, indicating that many groups are struggling with recruitment. (Though AQIM leaders hope that the defeat of the Islamic State, despite its rivalry with AQIM, may provide some new recruits).¹⁶ Most militants no longer carry the heavy weapons that were available following the collapse of the Qaddafi regime; many only have access to shotguns and a few AK-47s.¹⁷ The Algerian military has cut off the supply networks that terrorist groups had used to equip their troops. Algerian security forces are today not only adequately equipped in counterterrorism operations, but they have reconciled with the population, which has become averse to terrorism, having suffered from a decade of bloodshed.

ISIS

ISIS militants have made many attempts to infiltrate Algeria through the Tunisian western border, but there too the Algerian army has repeatedly repelled or killed those militants. IS has repeatedly sought to establish a presence in Algeria; however, the military has successfully countered emerging IS cells.¹⁸ Jihadism in Algeria is no longer what it was in the 1990s, when its thousands of troops were supported by the population and when there existed a huge pool of young people to join the multitude of groups, such as the GIAs, the AIS, and the GSPC (now AQIM). These groups or IS do not have any support among the population anymore. Today, it is difficult to imagine IS, an alien organization, coming to Algeria to recruit young people to join jihad. True, the civil war in Libya has worried Algerian officials, which explains their mediation efforts to bring about a political solution, which would in turn help in eliminating the terrorist threat. Algerians have feared a spillover effect; thus, they have secured their border with Libya and assisted Tunisia in doing the same. In Libya, ISIS no longer represents the threat it once did (2016-2017), although the return of ISIS troops from Iraq and Syria, where they have suffered defeat, has caused understandable concern.

Political Parties: FIS, MSP, Nahda, MRN, and the Small Islamist Formations

The emergence of Islamist political parties in Algeria is a comparatively recent phenomenon.¹⁹ Religious political parties only became legal after the regime consented to political liberalization, prompted by bloody riots in October 1988. Most of the Islamist parties born in the period between 1989 and 1991 emerged out of a heterogeneous Islamist movement that took root in the 1960s. The most powerful and radical of them was the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), banned in March 1992 following its overwhelming victory in the first round of the legislative elections the previous December. Notwithstanding FIS' popularity (it won overwhelming victories in the 1990 municipal elections and in the 1991 legislative elections), its impressive organization, and its capacity to mobilize large segments of society, authorities banned the group because of its radical ideology and the threat it purportedly posed to the state and society. Although the FIS is defunct today, its influence has not completely vanished. Some of its members joined the still-legal Islamist parties and/or voted for them during elections, while others joined the multitude of armed groups that have fought the state since the 1990s.

Today, numerous legal Islamist parties remain active on the national political scene, including the Movement for Society and Peace (MSP), the Movement for Islamic Renaissance (*Nahda*), and its offshoot, the Movement for National Reform (MRN), and the recent ones legalized on the eve of the May 2012 legislative elections, namely, the Party for Liberty and Justice (PLJ), the Front for Justice and Development (FJD—El Adala), the Front for New Algeria (FAN), and the Front for Change (FC).²⁰ All endorse the eventual application of sharia law. However, unlike the FIS, which wished to implement it immediately, these parties (the MSP in particular) seek a gradual implementation of Islamic principles.

The MSP, the largest legal Islamist party in Algeria, was created in 1990 as the Movement for

Islamic Society/HAMAS, but changed its name to conform to the 1996 constitution, which forbade religious political expression. The group belonged to the “presidential alliance,” a conservative mixture of nationalist, Islamist, and technocratic parties. In early January 2012, the MSP withdrew from the presidential alliance, and pulling its four ministers out of the government. In March 2012, the MSP, with El Islah and Ennahda, formed the Green Alliance. The three parties ran on the same ticket in the country’s subsequent legislative election. However, the Green Alliance did quite poorly in the 2012 legislature, garnering only 48 seats out of an expanded field of 462.

Nahda split in 1999 when its charismatic founding leader, Abdallah Djaballah, created yet another party, the Movement for National Reform (MRN or Islah). The MRN did very well in the 2002 local elections, coming in ahead of both the MSP and Nahda, after which it demanded a ban on the import of alcoholic beverages in 2004. However, Djaballah did quite poorly in the 2004 presidential election, receiving only 5 percent of the votes.²¹ The party has undergone further crises, and it is not clear what influence either Nahda or MSN now have—for, like most Algerian political parties, the fate of the parties is often tied to the individual that founded them. In the 2007 legislative election, the two parties garnered only five and three parliamentary seats, respectively. These parties did not gain many votes in the legislative election in May 2017. Indeed, in the legislative elections of May 2017, the Islamic Movement coalition ranked third with 33 out of 462 seats, a score that indicates some stagnation when compared to the results they obtained in 2012.

The three older parties had worked with the Algerian government, and abided by its constraints on political participation. In 2009, all three had endorsed the candidacy of sitting President Abdelaziz Bouteflika for a third term in office.²² That cooperation was a product of the comparative decline in popularity experienced by Islamist political parties in recent years, as well as their internal turmoil. For example, the MSP split into two factions in 2009 due to the loss of popularity of its president, Aboudjera Soltani, who served as a minister under various governments. Many members of the party did not agree with Soltani’s unconditional support for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and in June 2009 orchestrated a revolt inside the MSP. Following the dissensions and eventual split of the party, the MSP is no longer the force it once represented. Algerian Islamist parties have lost their appeal.²³

Before the May 2017 elections, the Islamist parties, such as the MSP and the FC, among others, sought to unify their forces with the hope of garnering more votes. However, despite these efforts, the Islamist political parties did poorly at the polls. The legislative elections in May 2017 signaled that the domesticated Islamist parties had weakened considerably. Local elections in November 2017 continued that trend. The regime has succeeded in not only taming the political Islamist parties, but also in fragmenting them, as was the case on the eve of the 2012 legislative election.²⁴ Indeed, many of these parties experienced internal ruptures,²⁵ which however does not necessarily mean that Islamist socio-political dynamics have broken down.²⁶

In addition to these party splits, there has been an unmistakable rise of quietist Salafists who refuse to partake in political life, considering it anathema, a ‘bid’a (heretical innovation). Although they do not represent a threat to the incumbent regime, they have nevertheless ascertained their presence in many mosques throughout the country. They do represent a challenge to the MSP because of the uncompromising nature of their discourse. While this state of affairs is favorable to the regime, as it plays Islamists against one another, large segments of society resent the growth of quietist Salafism; they see the conservative ideas of quietist Islamists as a potential danger.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Islam in Algeria is not simply the main religion of the population; it constitutes the primary foundation of identity and culture. Islamic beliefs and practices regulate social behavior and, largely, govern social

relations. While the socioeconomic failure of the 1980s provided a trigger for the emergence of Islamism in Algerian society, its doctrinal aspects derive at least in part from the crisis of identity generated by 132 years of colonial rule. France's brutal colonialism served to undermine the principal local religious institutions: mosques and religious schools were turned into churches or even bars, religious lands were expropriated, and Islamic culture was openly held up to be inferior to Christian/Western civilization. Because French colonialists treated the native population and values with contempt, the overwhelming majority of Algerians turned to Islam to establish their cultural identity. The country's nationalist movement itself, though secular, used Arab-Islamic values as symbols for popular mobilization against colonialism. Contemporary Islamists often claim that they are the legitimate offspring of that effort.

Islamism is still prevalent in Algeria. However, with few exceptions, Algerians do not support armed groups, as many did in the early and mid-1990s. The brutal massacres that armed groups committed in 1996-1999 alienated large segments of the population, and authorities continue to dismantle progressively the small number of die-hard support groups. Rather, Islamism today has turned to social conservatism with no institutional or partisan attachment.²⁷

Nevertheless, Islamist parties continue to do poorly in local and legislative elections. The local elections held in November 2017 confirmed the regression of Islamist parties in Algeria.²⁸ This decline was already perceptible in the April 2009 presidential election, during which the Islamist candidates were marginalized, with the Nahda candidate Djahid Younsi garnering a mere 1.3 percent of the votes and others even less.²⁹

Therefore, while it is hard to gauge the present popularity of Islamism as a social and political movement, what is certain is that the institutional parties as well as the armed groups have lost the appeal that they had had throughout the 1990s and even in the early 2000s. One can advance four reasons for such decline: 1) the legacy of the civil strife which left more than 150,000 dead, mostly innocent civilians, 2) the relative loss of legitimacy on the part of armed groups like the GIAs and AQIM, which resorted to barbaric methods to impose their will upon the population; the methods were criticized by the leadership of Al-Qaida central itself because those methods could alienate the population and lose its support 3) the relative success of the 2005 National Reconciliation, which led to the surrender of thousands of armed militants and the extension of amnesty to numerous Islamists, and, 4) general disappointment with Islamist political parties, which are perceived as opportunistic and self-serving.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In 1989, Algerian authorities, in violation of a constitution that forbade the existence of parties based on religion, legalized the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a radical Islamist party. A front made up of a variety of forces, including alumni of the Afghan jihad, the FIS eventually became one of the most potent force against the state. In June 1990, the government organized nationwide municipal elections, the first pluralist elections in the country, and then cancelled the second round 1991 elections when it appeared that the FIS would win overwhelmingly. It cancelled the election, claiming that the victory of the FIS would have ended the democratic process altogether. The government banned the FIS shortly thereafter—and imprisoned its leaders—which resulted in a crisis of the state. The civil strife that ensued not only pitted the security forces against armed groups but also spilled over to ravage the civilian population, notably in the horrible collective massacres of 1997 and 1998.

The intensity of the armed Islamist insurrection of the 1990s took Algeria's security forces by surprise. Authorities never envisioned the remarkable degree of organization prevalent among jihadist groups, or the significant resources available to them. The level of unrestrained destruction that these armed groups inflicted upon the state structures, personnel, intellectuals, journalists, moderate Islamists, and the various strata of society was intense, such that some spoke of the demise of the Algerian state.³⁰

Aware of the near-collapse of the state and its institutions, civilian and military authorities took mea-

asures to safeguard the state. The first action was to remove elected Islamist officials from the municipalities and replace them with state-appointed officials. Armed Islamists eventually assassinated many of those replacements. The state also decided to arm thousands of people, many of them unemployed youths, throughout the country to serve as auxiliary forces for regular troops. These security agents, known as *gardes communaux* [municipal sentries], played a critical role in fighting Islamist insurgents, especially in the suburbs.

Moreover, the government increased the size of the police force and provided new recruits with more competent antiterrorist training, both in Algeria and abroad.³¹ The police force acquired some adapted equipment imported from the former Soviet bloc, South Africa, and elsewhere. The state also took measures to thwart the financing of the insurgency. It incorporated a series of decisions, notably “La lutte contre le blanchiment (LAB) et contre le financement du terrorisme (CFT),” into the 2003 Finance Act (*Loi de Finance*)³² to combat the funding of terrorist groups and money laundering. These laws allow authorities to trace the financial sources of the terrorist networks through numerous methods, from the freezing of suspicious assets and to the use of intelligence procedures to prevent suspicious financial operations.³³ Algeria is a member of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF), a Financial Action Task Force-style regional body.³⁴

The 2005 Law on National Reconciliation offered clemency measures and/or pardon for those Islamist fighters who surrendered to the state. In October 2010, authorities declared that 7,500-armed insurgents had surrendered.³⁵ The law was relatively successful. However, it did not contain provisions through which it was possible to seek justice against Islamists or members of security forces who committed crimes during the bloody decade of the 1990s. As the fates of thousands of people who were disappeared during the conflict are still unknown, this lack of closure continues to rankle many in the population. In 2016, the government added new articles to the penal code to strengthen measures against foreign terrorists, individuals who support or finance foreign violent extremists, and the usage of information technology in violent extremist recruiting and support. The law also targets internet service providers who do not abide by legal duties to store information or to hinder access to criminal material. The expansion of the legal measures aims at executing UN Security Council resolutions (UNSCR) 2178 (2014) and 2199 (2015), and the UN Security Council (UNSC) ISIL (ISIS) and al-Qaeda sanctions regime.³⁶

The Algerian government cooperates closely with the governments of countries in the Sahel, such as Mali and Niger, in its counterterrorism efforts. The most noteworthy pursuit is its participation in the U.S.-led Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Partnership to fight terrorism in the Maghreb-Sahel region.³⁷ Algeria has also sought to create a quasi-collective security community with the Sahel states, namely, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger to counter the terrorist threat in the region. Unfortunately, the fragility of those states undermined the potential capabilities of the General Staff Joint-Operations Committee (CEMOC) and the Algiers-based Joint-Intelligence Centre (CRC).³⁸ However, like other initiatives in the region, CEMOC is a rather ineffective alliance due to the lack of trust among the members, as well as foreign interference. In December 2017, French president Emmanuel Macron added a military component to the G5, which regroups Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Algeria has refused to join because it sees it as foreign interference in the region. Most analysts agree that the G5 might fail not only because it needs substantial funding (it is not United Nations-supported grouping) but also because Algeria, a key player in the Sahel, is absent from it.

A war has been ongoing in northern Mali since January 2013, and Algeria has played a small but significant role. It has allowed French warplanes to overfly its territory to dislodge AQIM and other groups from the cities they had occupied hitherto. It likewise has closed its long border with Mali, to prevent jihadists from fleeing the conflict and seeking refuge on Algerian territory. Algeria has also helped broker a deal between the various Tuareg factions and between those factions and the central government

in Bamako.³⁹ In July 2015, the Tuareg factions and Bamako signed a peace deal; the deal so far has been unsuccessful. Peace has not been restored and the groups continue their activities because of the persistent absence of the state in the north of the country,⁴⁰ and despite France's presence. Furthermore, Algeria is helping Tunisia protect its borders against assaults from ISIS and has deployed thousands of troops along both its Tunisian and Libya borders.

Indeed, Algeria has sealed military border areas (Libya, Niger, and Mali), adding more observer stations along the Tunisian and Libyan borders.⁴¹ After the attack against the gas plant in 2013, the authorities have since fortified the oil and gas installations, imported sophisticated aerial-based surveillance technologies and greatly improved the country's communication systems.⁴² Overall, Algerian authorities have taken serious measures to counter terrorism, enacting a multitude of laws and erecting safeguards to thwart the reemergence of jihadism inside Algeria's borders.

Morocco has continuously accused Algeria of not cooperating on counterterrorism initiatives in the Sahel. Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita stated during a meeting of the G5 that the "Sahel is not the preserve of anyone,"⁴³ suggesting that Algeria cannot exclude Morocco from being a player in the Sahel. Algerians, for their part, argue that events in the Sahel should be the responsibility of the Sahelian states, and that Moroccan is not a Sahelian state.⁴⁴ This reflects the enduring rivalry between Algeria and Morocco since their independence from colonial France.⁴⁵ However, there is some cooperation between the two countries against terrorism. For instance, as mentioned above, both participate in the US-led Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership as well as in the Global Forum on International Terrorism. Furthermore, Algerian authorities have informed their counterparts about Moroccans seeking to join ISIS in Syria. Algerian security forces repatriated these would-be jihadists to Morocco. One argument Algerian officials make in private is that Algeria guarantees Morocco's security at no cost to Morocco and at a great expense to Algeria, which has deployed thousands of troops to thwart the threats coming from the Sahel.⁴⁶ No matter the public mutual recriminations, both cooperate, albeit at a minimum, when it comes to their common security.

Algeria watchers wonder what the succession to the ailing Bouteflika would mean for Islamism and counterterrorism in the country. In view of the tragedy that Algeria underwent in the 1990s, it is certain that there will be little or no change to the current security policy, which consists of an implacable war on the jihadists while focusing on development and programs of deradicalization to prevent the youth from succumbing to the influence of jihadi ideology. Counterterrorism has in fact become one of the components of Algeria's foreign policy. Non-violent, domesticated Islamism will remain part of the societal evolution that Algeria has witnessed in recent decades. Short of a cataclysmic ideological break—similar to what might be happening in Saudi Arabia—Algerians will continue to view social conservatism, rightly or wrongly, as part of their identity. However, the reminiscences of the 1990s will likely prevent the conversion of this social conservatism into jihadism.

ENDNOTES

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