



ALGERIA

Quick Facts

Population: 42,972,878 (July 2020 est.)
Area: 2,381,740 sq km
Ethnic Groups: Arab-Berber 99%, European less than 1%
Government Type: Presidential republic
GDP (official exchange rate): \$167.6 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated July 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Since Algeria declared its independence from France in 1962, the country has seen many opposition groups. However, 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. However, conservative Islamism continues to hold appeal for many in Algeria to this day. The Algerian government's attempts at reconciliation in 1994, 1999 and 2005 aided the decline of violent extremist groups, but unwittingly legitimized and empowered political Islamism, at least for a time. While Islamic parties have diminished in stature and appeal, as evidenced by their dwindling power and dismal electoral results in recent years, their ideas and underlying social conservatism remain.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Jihadism in Algeria is no longer as prominent as it was in the 1990s. Back then, thousands of troops were supported by the population and there existed a huge pool of young people ready to join a multitude of groups, such as the GIA, the AIS, and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, now al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM). These groups, and the Islamic State (IS), are no longer supported by the population. Estimates about the number of armed Islamist militants operating in Algeria vary between 200 and 400.¹ Many of these militants shift their affiliation between more established groups—AQIM being the most prominent – and regional splinter groups.

GSPC/AQIM

The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in Algeria was a militant organization that waged *jihad* against the Algerian government and tried to implement *sharia* law within the country.² In 2006, it

merged with al-Qaeda, renaming itself al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) the following year. Like GSPC, AQIM resists the Algerian government, but now does so 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 regional influence but remains the dominant organized Islamist force in its immediate neighborhood.

AQIM is primarily concentrated in the ethnically Kabylie region in northeastern Algeria and in the Algerian desert along the Sahara-Sahel. However, the Algerian government's successful attacks compelled AQIM to move into Algeria's southern territory before eventually settling in northern Mali. Despite pressure from Algerian security forces, AQIM's sporadic attacks have continued.⁴ Arguably the most important of these occurred in January 2013, when AQIM militants targeted the In Amenas gas plant in southern Algeria. The attack resulted in the death of 40 gas plant staff members (mostly foreigners) and at least 29 militants.⁵ AQIM has likewise continued to periodically assassinate police and military officers.⁶

AQIM receives considerable amounts of money from drug trafficking and provides safe travel for smugglers through the desert.⁷ It also provides protection and storage facilities to drug traffickers in exchange for large sums of money.⁸ AQIM also has connections with weapons trafficking, and in the past is known to have engaged in kidnapping for ransom.

An analysis of the security situation in Algeria indicates that the threat of AQIM has diminished considerably, in great part due to security forces' efforts.⁹ In 2018, for instance, there were no reports of any terrorist attacks inside Algeria's borders.¹⁰ This was due mostly to organizational changes; the head of AQIM, Abdel-Malek Droukdel, who operated out of the mountains of Kabylia for more than 15 years. Being isolated, he had fled ostensibly to neighboring Tunisia in 2016 to avoid death or capture.¹¹ and has remained passive since. On June 3 2020, Droukdel was killed by French special forces in Mali; U.S. intelligence and other support provided to the French operation were instrumental in locating and killing him along with his lieutenants and other AQIM members.¹²

Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

ISIS militants have attempted to infiltrate Algeria through the Tunisian border, but the Algerian army has repeatedly repelled or killed many of them.¹³ Today, it is difficult to imagine IS, a foreign organization, successfully entrenching itself in Algeria and recruiting young people to participate in *jihād*.¹⁴

Nevertheless, ISIS represents a concern in the context of the Libyan civil war. The Algerian government has long feared a spillover effect from that long-running conflict, and has therefore secured the country's common border with Libya, as well as assisted Tunisia in doing the same. The Algerian military fears that terrorists, under the instigation of unfriendly, authoritarian governments in the region, could infiltrate Algeria through its porous border with Libya, with the intent of undermining Algerian political stability.

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

The emergence of Islamist political parties in Algeria is a relatively recent phenomenon.¹⁵ Religious political parties only became legal after the regime consented to political liberalization, which in turn was prompted by bloody riots in October 1988. Most 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), which was banned in March 1992 following its overwhelming victory in the first round of the legislative elections that had taken place the previous December. Notwithstanding FIS' popularity (it won overwhelming victories in the 1990 municipal elections and in legislative elections the following year), its impressive organization and its ability to mobilize large segments of society led authorities to ban the group because of its supposed threat to the state and society. Although the FIS is defunct today, its influence has not completely vanished. Some of its members joined the country's remaining legal Islamist parties and/or voted for them during elections, while others joined

armed groups that have fought against 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*), its offshoot, the Movement for National Reform (MRN), and other factions that were legalized on the eve of the May 2012 legislative elections. These include 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),¹⁶ all of which endorse the eventual application of *sharia* law. However, unlike the FIS, which wished to implement it immediately, these parties (the MSP in particular) hope to introduce Islamic principles gradually.

Before the May 2017 parliamentary elections, Islamist parties made an effort to gather votes but still did poorly at the polls, signaling that the domesticated Islamist parties had weakened considerably. However, that does not necessarily mean that Islamist socio-political dynamics have broken down.¹⁷

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 with policies introduced under the 1996 constitution that 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, pulling its four ministers out of the government. In March 2012, the MSP formed the Green Alliance with *El Islah* and *Ennahda*. 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, and dissolved in 2017.

Nahda split in 1999, when its charismatic founding leader, Abdallah Djaballah, created another party, the Movement for National Reform (MRN or *Islah*). The MRN finished ahead of both MSP and *Nahda* in the 2002 local elections, after which it demanded a ban on the import of alcoholic beverages in 2004. However, Djaballah himself did quite poorly in the 2004 presidential election, receiving only five percent of the votes.¹⁸ The party has undergone further crises, and it is not clear what influence either *Nahda* or MRN now have; like most Algerian political parties, the fate of the parties is often tied to the individual that founded them. Indeed, in the most recent legislative elections of May 2017 – Algerian parliamentary elections occur every five years – the Islamic Alliance made up of MSP and *Islah* ranked third with 33 out of 462 seats, a score that indicates a significant lack of popular support.¹⁹

The three older parties worked with the Algerian government and abided by its constraints on political participation. In 2009, all three endorsed the candidacy of sitting President Abdelaziz Bouteflika for a third term in office.²⁰ That cooperation was a product of the recent, comparative decline in popularity experienced by Islamist political parties, 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, they orchestrated a revolt inside the MSP. Following the dissensions and eventual split of the party, the MSP is no longer as potent a force.²¹ In December 2019, MSP publicly announced that it backed none of the candidates in upcoming presidential elections.²² In June 2020, Abderrazak Makri, head of the MSP, praised Rached Ghannouchi, chief official of Tunisia’s *Ennahda* party, in a Facebook post²³ (*Ennahda* holds the most seats in Tunisian parliament and is connected to the Muslim Brotherhood).²⁴

In addition to party splits, there has been an unmistakable rise of quietist Salafists who refuse to partake in political life, considering it *bid’a* (heretical innovation). Although they do not represent a threat to the incumbent regime, they have nevertheless asserted their presence in many mosques throughout the country.²⁵ Their presence represents a challenge to the MSP because of their uncompromising discourse. While this state of affairs is favorable to the regime, as it plays Islamists against one another, large segments of society see the conservative ideas of quietist Islamists as a potential danger.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Islamism 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 its 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.

Modern Algerian religious identity does not lend itself to support for extremist groups that justify their actions through Islam, however. Rather, with few exceptions, Algerians do not currently support armed groups. The brutal massacres that armed groups committed in 1996-1999 alienated large segments of the population and authorities continue to dismantle the small number of terror support networks.²⁶

One can advance four reasons for the decline of political Islam: 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; methods which were criticized by the leadership of al-Qaeda central itself because they could alienate the population 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 being opportunistic and self-serving.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

In 1989, Algerian authorities violated a constitutional provision that forbade the existence of religious political parties and legalized the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a radical Islamist party. Made up of a variety of forces including alumni of the Afghan *jihad*, the FIS eventually became a potent anti-state force. In June 1990, the government organized nationwide municipal elections, the first pluralist elections in the country, and then cancelled the second round elections when it appeared that the FIS would win overwhelmingly. The government justified its actions by claiming that the FIS victory would have ended the democratic process altogether. The FIS was banned shortly thereafter, and its leaders imprisoned, which resulted in domestic unrest, pitting security forces against armed groups and instigating horrible collective massacres in 1997 and 1998.

The intensity of the armed Islamist insurrection of the 1990s took Algeria's security forces by surprise. The level of unrestrained destruction that these armed groups inflicted upon state structures, personnel, intellectuals, journalists, moderate Islamists, and various strata of society was so intense that some spoke of the demise of the Algerian state.²⁷ Aware of the threat to the state and its institutions, civilian and military authorities took measures 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.

Moreover, the government increased the size of the police force and provided new recruits with more competent antiterrorist training, both in Algeria and abroad.²⁸ The police force acquired some adapted

equipment imported from the former Soviet bloc, South Africa, and elsewhere. The state took measures to thwart the insurgency's financing and incorporated a series of decisions, notably "La lutte contre le blanchiment (LAB) et contre le financement du terrorisme (CFT)," into the 2003 Finance Act.²⁹ to combat the funding of terrorist groups and money laundering. These laws allowed authorities to trace the financial sources of these terrorist networks through numerous methods.³⁰ Algeria is a member of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF).³¹

The 2005 Law on National Reconciliation offered clemency measures and/or pardons for those Islamist fighters who surrendered to the state. In October 2010, authorities declared that 7,500-armed insurgents had surrendered; however, the law 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.³² To this day, the fates of thousands of people who disappeared during the conflict are still unknown.

In 2015, the government amended its penal code; the new articles adopted the following year aimed 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.³³ The expansion of the legal measures aims at executing UN Security Council resolutions (UNSCR) 2178 (2014) and 2199 (2015), the UN Security Council (UNSC) ISIL (ISIS), and al-Qaeda sanctions regime.³⁴

The Algerian government cooperates closely with other governments 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.³⁵ 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).³⁶ 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 of Algeria's absence.

Algeria has played a small but significant role in the ongoing conflict in northern Mali. 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 in Algerian territory.³⁷ Algeria has also helped broker a deal between the various Tuareg - a large ethnically Amazigh population, known colloquially as "Berber," who inhabit territory stretching from southwestern Libya to southern Algeria, Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso - factions and nearby Mali.³⁸ In July 2015, the Tuareg factions and Bamako signed a peace deal. However, this has so far has been unsuccessful in curbing unrest because of the persistent absence of the state in the north of the country.³⁹ 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.

After the attack against the gas plant in 2013, authorities have fortified oil and gas installations, imported sophisticated aerialbased surveillance technologies, and greatly improved the country's communication systems.⁴⁰ Overall, Algerian authorities have taken serious measures to counter terrorism, enacting a multitude of laws and erecting safeguards to thwart the reemergence of *ihadism* inside Algeria's borders.⁴¹

Despite these efforts, 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,"⁴² 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 Morocco is not a Sahelian state.⁴³ This reflects the enduring rivalry between Algeria and Morocco since their independence from colonial France.⁴⁴ However, there is some cooperation between the two countries against terrorism. For instance, as mentioned above, both participate in the U.S.-led Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership as well as in the Global Forum on International Terrorism. Furthermore, Algerian authorities have also informed their counterparts about Moroccans seeking to join ISIS in Syria. Algerian security forces repatriated these would-be *ihadists* 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.⁴⁵ No matter the mutual public recriminations, both countries cooperate at a minimum level when it comes to their common security.

Despite the forceful removal of Bouteflika in April 2019 by the Algerian military and subsequent domestic and political turmoil, public statements indicate that there will be little or no change to the current security policy, which consists of an implacable war on the *ihadists* and the development of programs designed to prevent youth radicalization. While recently elected president Abdelmadjid Tebboune is early in his term and his administration's security policy still ill-defined, he has reiterated calls for security cooperation to fight terrorism following the death of Droukdel.⁴⁶

Nonviolent, domesticated Islamism will remain part of the societal evolution that Algeria has recently witnessed. Short of a fundamental ideological break, Algerians will continue to view social conservatism, rightly or wrongly, as part of their identity. However, memories of the 1990s will likely prevent the conversion of this social conservatism into *ihadism*. Algerians have learned from the current crisis that peaceful demonstrations with no dominant ideology are the best means of bringing about change.

ENDNOTES

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Algeria

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43. Author's interviews with Algerian security and diplomatic officials.
44. See Yahia H. Zoubir, "The Algerian-Moroccan Rivalry: Constructing the Imaginary Enemy," in William Thompson and Imad Mansour, eds. *Shocks and Rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 179-200; see also Yahia H. Zoubir, "Algerian-Moroccan Relations and Their Impact on Maghrebi Integration," *Journal of North African Studies* 5, no. 3, Fall 2000 (2001), 43-74. Although this latter article is old, the core arguments have remained virtually intact.
45. Author's interview with high-level officials in Algeria and abroad in 2016 and 2017.
46. "Algeria urges cooperation against 'terror' after Qaeda chief killed," *Arab News*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1687196/middle-east>.