

American Foreign Policy Council

ALGERIA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 40,263,711 (estimated July 2016)

Area: 2,381,741 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab-Berber 99%, European less than 1%

Religions: Muslim (official; predominantly Sunni) 99%, other (includes Christian and Jewish) <1%.

Government Type: Presidential Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$168.3 billion (estimated 2015)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (January 2017)

OVERVIEW

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, however, 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 simultaneously legitimated and empowered political Islamism. Recent years have seen Islamism rise in the Algerian political sphere; Islamist parties multiplied and gained parliamentary seats in national elections. While these parties have of late diminished in stature and appeal, evidenced by their declining power and dismal electoral results, Islamist ideas and underlying social conservatism nonetheless remain widespread in Algeria.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The exact numbers of Islamist militants operating in any country are generally hard 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 Islamic State in 2013, AQIM has had to compete with it for influence in the Maghreb-Sahel region.

AQIM is primarily concentrated in the ethnically Kabylie region in eastern 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 in the Kabylie region have compelled AQIM to move into Algeria's southern territory and beyond its borders (northern Mali). Counterterrorism operations carried out by Algerian security forces have greatly reduced the number of fighters in the north of the country. However, AQIM's sporadic attacks have not abated.⁴ In January 2013, AQIM militants attacked the In Amenas gas plant in southern Algeria. 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 so-called “black decade” (1992-1999), when the number had reached 1,000 per month.⁷ In 2014, Algeria witnessed the second largest reduction in deaths caused by terrorism around the world (the lowest since 1993, when only 7 deaths occurred.)⁸ In 2015, a total of 62 terrorist attacks took place, resulting in a couple dozen victims.⁹ Security forces were quite successful in 2016 as they neutralized 350 terrorists, of whom 125 were killed and 225 arrested.¹⁰ In February 2017 alone, the Armed Forces killed 19 extremist fighters and arrested nine.¹¹ 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.

The income of AQIM comes mostly from smuggling, credit-card fraud, and car theft.¹² Kidnapping foreigners has also been used to finance AQIM's activities, since many countries, such as Switzerland, Austria, Germany, and Canada, France, Spain, and Italy, have agreed to pay ransoms for the release of their citizens. Algeria itself has had a consistent policy of not negotiating with terrorists, and has been pushing for international legislation to criminalize the payment of ransoms. Algeria has lobbied in the African Union, the United Nations, and in the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCFT) to criminalize the payment of ransoms. In 2009, it managed to get the African Union to pass a resolution on this matter which "strongly condemns the payment of ransoms to terrorist groups for hostages to be freed."¹³ In fact, the country has strived to persuade the UN to adopt an analogous resolution on the payment of ransoms. Although not as strong as the AU's, UN Security Council

Resolution 1904 of 2009 contains provisions criminalizing such payments.¹⁴ The lobbying at the UN for the passing of more constraining resolutions;¹⁵ Algeria's activism on the question has been more successful at the GCFT.¹⁶ In January 2014, the UN Security Council adopted "Resolution 2133 (2014), Calling upon States to Keep Ransom Payments, Political Concessions from Benefiting Terrorist."¹⁷

Both the Movement for the Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and AQIM also are known to receive considerable amounts of money from drug trafficking.¹⁸ Both groups have sought various sources of funding in order to purchase weapons and to invest in some lucrative sectors, and established links with drug traffickers as a way of increasing their revenues. 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.¹⁹

The Algerian state has initiated a relatively effective crackdown against AQIM in recent years.²⁰ The crackdown has relied on support from the local population, which has helped thwart kidnappings and has demonstrated a growing mobilization against AQIM's operations in certain parts of the country. State security operations have continued to this day, with notable results. In 2012, for instance, state security forces neutralized more than 400 militants, killing nearly 200 of them, including a few emirs (leaders), and arresting the rest. Others surrendered the same year.²¹ These successes are attributable to greater intelligence now possessed by the state (amassed from Islamists who surrendered or repented, advanced databases, and so forth), as well as to the population's collaboration with the security forces; villagers denounce suspicious movements of individuals believed to be terrorists, thus prompting the

deployment of soldiers in the suspected area, a trend that has continued into 2017. In February 2017, security forces launched important antiterrorist operations following information the villagers had provided.

Meanwhile, the presence in Algeria of al-Qaeda's main competitor, the Islamic State, is minimal, in spite of IS's repeated attempts to establish cells in the country. Algerian security forces eliminated the most important IS cell, *Jund al Khalifah* group, an AQIM splinter faction that pledged allegiance to IS in September 2014. Security forces have also attempted to destroy another cell, likewise an AQIM splinter faction based in the eastern city of Skikda that pledged allegiance to IS in spring 2015. A lesser-known group, the *al-Ghuraba Brigade*, which operates near the eastern city of Constantine (yet another splinter group from AQIM), has also allied with IS, also poses a security risk. Al-Ansar Brigade and Humat al-Dawa are believed to have joined IS, but security forces prevented them from launching any attacks. In spite of the media attention they elicit, these cells are very small and their attacks have not been lethal. The latest illustration is the failed suicide attack on 27 February 2017 against a police station in the eastern city of Constantine, an attack for which IS claimed responsibility.²² In sum, the terrorist groups in Algeria are very small for the most part and their influence among the population is insignificant, unlike what occurred throughout the 1990s.

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

The emergence of Islamist political parties in Algeria is a comparatively recent phenomenon.²³ 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), which was 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, the 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 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 political scene: 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 before 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).²⁴ All endorse the eventual application of *sharia* law. But, unlike the FIS, which wished to immediately implement it, 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 forbids 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, without however 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.

Nabda 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 *Nabda*, 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.²⁵ The party has undergone further crises, and it is not clear what influence either *Nabda* or MSN now have—for, like most Algerian political parties, the fate of the parties is often linked to the individual that founded them. In the 2007 legislative election, the two parties garnered only five and three parliamentary seats, respectively. It is doubtful whether these parties will gain many votes in the upcoming legislative election in May 2017. For now, Islamist parties are contemplating the possibility of building an opposition bloc in the hope of doing better than in the previous election in 2012.

The three older parties had 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.²⁶ 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 represented. Algerian Islamist parties have lost their appeal.²⁷

However, the electoral decline of Algeria’s Islamist political parties should not be interpreted as a decline of Islamism in the country writ large. To the contrary, social

conservatism has grown, making it possible to countenance a revival of support for these factions. And radical parties, such as the Front of the Salafist Islamic Sahwah [Renaissance] propagate extremist ideas.

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, to a large extent, 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, Algerians as a whole turned to Islam to establish their cultural identity. The country's nationalist movement used Arab-Islamic values as symbols for popular mobilization against colonialism. Contemporary Islamists often claim that they are the legitimate offspring of that effort.

Today, Islamism is still prevalent in Algeria. However, the overwhelming majority of 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 progressively dismantle the small number of die-hard support groups. Currently, only a few marginalized youths are attracted to groups like AQIM or the Islamic State. Rather, Islamism today has become a form of social conservatism with no institutional or partisan attachment.²⁸

Islamist parties did rather poorly in the 2007 legislative elections and even worse in the legislative election in May 2012. The municipal elections held on November 29, 2012, confirmed the regression of Islamist parties in Algeria.²⁹ 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. Based on this analysis, and the recent results at the polls, it is possible to conclude that Islamism, at least in its political form, is appealing to, at most, two percent of the electorate.³⁰

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 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 AQIM, which resorted to bar-

baric methods to impose their will upon the population; the methods were criticized by the leadership of Al-Qaida central itself because their use 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 radical Islamist party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). A front made up of a variety of forces, including Arab alumni of the Afghan *jihad*, the FIS eventually became one of the most potent armed groups against the state. In June 1990, the government organized nationwide municipal elections, the first pluralist elections in the country, and then cancelled them when it appeared that the FIS would win. It cancelled the election on the grounds that the victory of the FIS would have put an end to 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 in the 1990s took Algeria's security forces by surprise. The authorities never envisioned the remarkable degree of organization among the *jihadist* groups, or the significant resources available to them. The level of unrestrained destruction that the 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.³¹

Aware of the near-collapse of 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*, played a critical role in fighting Islamist insurgents.

To protect public infrastructures, the authorities forced companies to create specially trained security services (known as the services *de sûreté interne d'établissements*) within those organizations. According to Algerian officials, within one year of their creation, the existence of such services reduced the number of acts of sabotage against social and economic structures by 75 percent.³² The state also created the *détachements de protection et de sûreté*, brigades entrusted with the protection of industrial

plants. Because *jihadists* targeted isolated villages and the suburbs of most cities, the authorities also set up the *groupes de légitime défense* (GLDs), which, though sometime deficient, did much to reduce terrorist attacks on innocent civilians.

Moreover, the government increased the size of the police force and provided new recruits with more efficient antiterrorist training, both in Algeria and abroad.³³ 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)³⁴ 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.³⁵

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.³⁶ The law was relatively successful. However, it did not provide provision through which to seek justice against Islamists or members of security forces who committed crimes in 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 rankles many in the population.

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, the so called “core countries,” in order to counter the terrorist threat in the region. Unfortunately, the fragility of those states undermined the potential for a General Staff Joint-Operations Committee (CEMOC) and the Algiers-based Joint-Intelligence Centre (CRC).³⁸ But, like other initiatives in the region, CEMOC is a moribund alliance due to the lack of trust among the members, as well as foreign interference.

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, the MUJAO and other groups, such as the Tuareg *Ansar el Dine*, from the cities they had occupied. 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 in the persistent absence of the

state in the north of the country.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Algeria is helping Tunisia protect its borders against assaults from IS and has deployed thousands of troops along both its Tunisian and Libya borders. Algeria has thereby become a key player in the war on terrorism.

ENDNOTES

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[38] Yahia H. Zoubir, “The Sahara-Sahel Quagmire: Regional and International Ramifications,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 17:3 (November 2012), 452-458.

[39] See, “Accord pour la paix et la réconciliation au Mali issu du processus d’Alger,” <http://photos.state.gov/libraries/mali/328671/peaceaccord-translations/1-accord-paix-et-reconciliation-francais.pdf>. See also, Benjamin Roger, “Accord d’Alger pour la paix au Mali : le plus dur reste à faire,” *Jeune Afrique*, 1 July 2015, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/241413/politique/accord-dalger-pour-la-paix-mali-le-plus-dur-reste-a-faire/>

[40] Selma Mihoubi, “Mali: un an après la signature de l’Accord d’Alger, quel avenir pour le Nord?” *Jeune Afrique*, 20 juin 2016, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/334516/politique/mali-paix-ans-apres-signature-de-laccord-dalger/>