

Africa and Anger

Algeria Remembers

Review by James Jay Carafano

Martin Evans and John Phillips. *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. Pp. 322. ISBN: 978-0-300-10881-1.

The publication of Martin Evans and John Phillips' *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* could not be more timely or necessary. Recently, the Pentagon established the U.S. Africa Command—AFRICOM. Its creation was not due to plans by the military to invade any African nation. In fact, the motivation for creating the command was the opposite: to disprove the notion that the outside world needs to solve the problems of Africans for them. Establishing AFRICOM will make

the United States a more knowledgeable and more effective partner in the region, and will not only preclude the need for armed intervention but will also support African solutions to Africa's issues.

The creation of the command was a long overdue decision. In an increasingly globalized world, the United States can no longer afford to ignore Africa or engage with it only during times of crisis. Africa is a vital source of energy and mineral resources. Failing and failed states are fertile grounds for conflict. Nations are often incapable of addressing transnational health and environmental concerns that could spread far beyond their borders.

AFRICOM will enable U.S. policymakers to focus more closely on Africa's problems, support regional efforts to address mutual concerns, and bolster capacity to tackle regional issues. This will only take place if the staff at AFRICOM and others interested in the region help to end the misconception, in thought

and in speech, that leads people to consider the African continent simply as a single entity. Africa is a polyglot of various countries, many of which resemble the nation-states of the West only in their possession of a seat at the UN. Each African nation has a unique history, culture, geography, and polity that cannot be ignored in the search for solutions and a future that will bring more prosperity than problems.

Algeria is particularly worthy of more detailed and informed study by the West. It is an African nation with global influence. Algeria is part of the “labor frontier,” a handful of developing nations with young, large populations. These states have achieved only modest strides in economic growth and education. A characteristic they share is a geographic position that allows them access to the developed world. Algeria, for example, is only a two-hour plane ride from the heart of Europe. The nations that comprise the labor frontier provide the overwhelming bulk of the tens of millions of transnational workers worldwide.

Through globalization, the problems of specific countries such as Algeria affect the rest of the planet. These issues include the scourge of transnational terrorism that stretches from Tangiers to Paris and “Londonistan.”¹ It would be wrong, however, to think of Algeria’s presence in the world as only a liability to itself and other nations. Algerians help fuel economic growth in the West. They also carry a lifeline back to their part of the world. Remittances—funds sent home by the labor diaspora living and working overseas—make up one of the largest forms of direct foreign investment but in many ways also dwarf other foreign assistance programs.

The influence of Algeria, along with

the other nations of the labor frontier, will likely only increase on the world stage in the years ahead. By some estimates, over the next fifteen years, Algeria and the surrounding countries will contribute an additional 15.5 million people to the European workforce alone.

Nonetheless, Algeria is an exporter of problems as well as people. *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* delves into the origins of these problems, exploring why solving them has proved to be intractable. The focus of the book is on a bloody internal struggle that spanned the 1990s, killing about 200,000 people.

The book nicely blends the strengths of its co-authors. Martin Evans is a professor of contemporary history at the University of Portsmouth. John Phillips is a veteran journalist, having worked for the *Times* and many other papers. They have indeed written a history worth reading.

The thesis of *Algeria* is eminently appealing since, from the outset, the book rejects the simplistic, cardboard explanations of why things go wrong in Africa. “We want to go beyond stereotypes,” assert Evans and Phillips, “which interpret the conflict as the consequence of a pathological Oriental mindset, the simple battle between secularists and Islamists, or the inevitable failure of the post-independence regime. There is nothing inevitable or predetermined about Algeria. Instead, the country’s tragedy has to be understood as the product of a specific and complex historical context filled at every point with alternative possibilities and counter-factual scenarios.”² *Algeria* traces the link from the past to the present, showing how the country arrived at its current political environment through historical precedents.

Evans and Phillips frame the context

for the civil war that crippled the country by outlining Algeria's troubling colonial past, from the shaky period of independence, marred by a malaise of high unemployment, rampant corruption, and political violence, to the post-Cold War era that saw superpower competition replaced by the rise of Islamic extremism.

The great strength of *Algeria* is the intelligent choices made by the authors in crafting a satisfying narrative that is com-

Like all the purveyors of violence in Algeria, Bin Laden found followers. One of the most notable was Ahmed Ressay. Ressay migrated to Canada where he became engaged in a plot to bomb the Los Angeles International Airport on New Year's Eve 1999. The "Millennium Bomber" was arrested at the border, convicted, and sentenced to a long prison term. Ressay should have been a wake-up call announcing the proliferation of

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prehensive but not overwhelming, highlighting key social, economic, and cultural developments as well as the country's political trials.

Indeed, about half the book covers the historical roots of contemporary Algeria.

History is not only the subject of Evans and Phillips's study; it is the major protagonist in the book. In Algeria, history became one of the principal tools for fueling conflict as factions competed to monopolize and manipulate the lessons of the country's ancient roots, colonial past, and the disappointments and difficulties of independence in hopes of delivering on promises of peace and prosperity.

Osama Bin Laden and his followers were only the latest in a long line of those who reinterpreted the past to justify the present, equating battling "globalist" influences in Algeria with throwing off the colonial imperialist yoke. Throughout the 1990s, al-Qaeda looked to Algeria, not only as base of operations and a potential source of recruiting, but also as a future battleground in the war to reestablish dominion over Muslim lands.

transnational terrorist threats. The notice, however, went largely unheeded.

"Although Ressay was the most extreme example," write Evans and Phillips, "many young Algerians, dispersed across Europe and North America either as immigrants or asylum seekers, gravitated toward extremist action. It would, of course, be wrong to suggest that every member of the Algerian diaspora was a potential terrorist. Nevertheless, the conditions of their lives abroad made a small minority highly susceptible to the lure of armed Islamism."³ Astutely, Evans and Phillips do not make the simplistic case that poverty causes terrorism. Instead, they make a subtle, more accurate point: vulnerable populations are always tempting targets for radicalization.

What *Algeria* should prompt most of all is a serious discussion on how to combat the forces that lead to extremism. If poverty alone does not cause terrorism and civil wars, then foreign aid alone will not bring peace. Addressing the "root" causes of political violence requires more than simply satisfying humanitarian

impulses. The vaccine against spiraling violence is building a just civil society. As Evans and Phillips illustrate, however, over the course of a long, bitter history, Algerians have made many missteps that have frustrated the effort to foster transparency, good governance, and justice. The result, as has happened in so many

other places on the continent, was the rise of conflict in Algeria.

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NOTES

¹ The nickname given to London after it turned a blind eye to religious extremists. Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* (New Haven:

Yale University Press, 2007), xv.

² *Ibid.*, xv.

³ *Ibid.*, 261.