

THE RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION IN ALGERIA

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This article provides an analytical discussion on the religious opposition in Algeria, exploring the conditions and conflict-prone effects of the movement. Through historical analysis, the study reveals that the Islamist opposition in Algeria is to some extent value-driven, but it is mostly a reaction to undesirable local conditions, especially economic distress, widespread poverty, and unjust distribution of national wealth. Thus, the article suggests that positive actions be taken to deal with these issues if the religious opposition is to be successfully managed in Algeria.

INTRODUCTION

One of the clearest aspects of the post-Cold War era is the rise of religion as a social and political movement around the globe, and, by extension, the growing number of religiously-driven conflicts. This trend appears to be more evident in the Middle East, although it is not limited to this particular region. The secular governments in the Middle East have been frequently challenged, sometimes quite seriously, by Islamist oppositions that want to establish a state based on religious rules. The clash between government forces and militant Islamists often resulted in severe casualties, in which many innocent people, foreigners, as well as fighting sides themselves became victims.

In order to manage religious opposition and cope with its conflict-prone effects, it is necessary to understand the nature of such opposition. Algeria offers a valuable case study, since although the country—unlike many Middle Eastern countries—has no tradition of early Islamic revivalism, the secular government was seriously challenged by political Islamism in the 1990s and only survived with the help of the military. Subsequently, violent clashes lasting about a decade erupted, as a result of which the Algerian people suffered. Though the violence evidently decreased from 2002 and on, the conflict between the secularists and Islamists has continued to some extent.

This article will start with brief background information regarding the roots of the religious opposition in Algeria. Then, through use of historical analysis, it will focus on the twentieth century Islamic revivalism, discussing the factors and conditions that gave rise to the Islamist challenge. Based on the evaluations, the concluding section will also address the implications of the findings for conflict management.

ALGERIA AND RELIGION IN COLONIAL YEARS

A glance at the history of Algeria suggests that the country has no deep-rooted history as a political entity. The country was molded largely by France in the nineteenth century to suit its colonial purposes.^[1] The colonization of Algeria was both long (1831-1962) and intense in that the ultimate objective was the assimilation and incorporation of the country as an integral part of France. This was to be achieved by “Frenchifying” the country, casting Algeria in the image of France culturally, linguistically, and even

demographically (through the proliferation of the French settlements). French influences were thoroughly woven into the fabric of the society, diluting indigenous culture and identity. It is interesting that as recently as the 1970s, more than 60 percent of Algerians could not read Arabic, their native language.[2]

As a result of this powerful colonial legacy, a European-like secular culture developed and became predominant, particularly in the urban areas. Islam, on the other hand, remained essentially marginal in public life, confined to the rural Sufi orders and to the few urban-based networks of the *ulama* (Muslim scholars), dealing mainly with religious issues, more often moral. Certainly, the French would not have tolerated any form of Islamic revivalism that might have threatened their rule. In general, however, Islam was largely devoid of a dynamic activist spirit throughout much of the colonial period.[3]

The one exception to Islamic dormancy was the establishment of the Association of the Algerian Ulama under the leadership of Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis in May 1931. In its founding articles, the association described itself as “an association for moral education” and stated as one of its primary aims the fight against the “social scourges” of “alcoholism, gambling, and ignorance.”[4] Basically reformist, the initial objective of the association was to deliver Islam from the perceived polluted and corrupt innovations of the Sufis through a cultural and educational revival, with its emphasis on the original sources and the ways of *al-salaf*, the pious ancestors of early Islam. Later on, the movement began to address the whole issue of French colonial rule and became more involved in the inceptive nationalist demands for equal rights and preservation of a distinctive Muslim identity. It clearly rejected the notion that Algerian Muslims could become Frenchmen.[5] Accordingly, the French rule met its first challenger, albeit at the cultural level.

Although the Ben Badis movement has no tradition of political activity, its message laid the foundation of an Algerian national Muslim consciousness and identity that would give stimulus to the revolution in 1954, which, in turn, initiated the war of independence (1954-1962). As the revolutionary momentum swept the country, Ben Badis’ reform movement became constituent part of the wartime National Liberation Front (FLN), and by 1956, it was entirely subsumed. The paramount position of the FLN, with its predominantly secularist-modernist orientation, established the supremacy of the mostly French-educated secular leaders and the subordination of the *ulama*. The FLN looked upon Islam simply as one significant element of national and cultural identity. Its stance was far from a commitment to religion.[6]

Accordingly, the emergent nationalist movement was not really a religious revivalist force; rather, it was an anti-colonial movement, which utilized religious sentiments for the purpose of bringing about the mobilization of the populace in the battle for liberation. Colonial France was rejected by the assertion of native Islamic culture and identity, but the FLN’s intention was to shape the future of the Algerian state in accord with its own secularist vision—in the French, not Islamic mold.

ALGERIA AFTER INDEPENDENCE: THE RISE OF THE ISLAMIST CHALLENGE

As a result, the tradition of secularism went on after Algeria became an independent state in 1962. Over roughly the next 30 years, the FLN, which became Algeria’s sole ruling political party, steered the country in a modern secular direction, depriving Islam, in this respect, of a public role and relegating it to the status of a cultural element in the makeup of Algerian identity, with no political implications.[7] In fact, Islam gained an official status and became part of the state bureaucracy with the establishment of the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Contrary to the initial expectations, thus, neither Islam nor Arabic enjoyed much esteem or status following independence. Islam was used to justify state socialism, and Arabic remained the language of the poorly-educated, young urban poor. Oddly enough, French became more widespread because of the expansion of education and the continued use of French in the growing state bureaucracy, even after more than 30 years of independence. Arab-Islamic education, on the other hand, was viewed as inferior, and thus undesirable.[8]

Though Islam was generally dormant throughout much of the 1960s and 1970s, it underwent occasional revivifying moments before the rise of political Islamism under the umbrella of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Early manifestations of Islamist dissent from the secularist course came into being with the founding in 1963 of the *Jam'iyat al-Qiyam al-Islamiyya* (the Association of Islamic Values) by Shaykh Ahmad Sahnoun and Abd al-Latif Sultani. The movement advocated the restoration of Islamic values and ethos, and adherence to Islamic principles in social life in general. It was highly critical of foreign cultural influences on the moral fiber of Islamic society.[9] Though emphasizing essentially the societal-ethical dimension, its message was laced with anti-secularism; thus, the movement was suppressed by the Algerian government in spite of its ostensibly apolitical nature. In 1970, the organization was permanently banned.

Islamic revivalism surfaced again in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a result of President Boumedienne's socialist-Marxist revolution. The president's nationalization policies extended to seizure of private small businesses and expropriation of farmland. Those Algerians who became disadvantaged as a result of state policies thus formed an unofficial Islamist alliance against state socialism. Besides, the socialist state-run economy promoted a new class of modernists—French educated technocrats with special privileges and status, which set them apart from the vast majority of Algerians. A new caste of overlords ran the country as its fiefdom, singing the promises of socialism and living the lives of capitalism. The majority's resentment was increasingly expressed in terms of Islamic egalitarianism, preaching the values of social equality and justice.[10]

Although some of the state policies would foment a future Islamic revivalism, albeit indirectly, there was no significant religious challenge to the regime throughout much of the 1970s. There were two primary reasons for this. First, the state, supported by the military and security apparatus, managed to build a comprehensive network of controls over all aspects of the nation's life, including the monopolization of Islam. Second, the state welfare system was mainly solvent—thanks to oil and gas revenues—and thus able to meet the basic substantial needs of the people, ranging from supplying foodstuffs, education, and job opportunities to medical care. The promised development and welfare were the substitute for political participation. Therefore, the regime was able to maintain a semblance of legitimacy based on an implicit social contract—"We take care of you, we rule over you"—an arrangement indeed common to all other Arab authoritarian systems.[11]

After Boumedienne's death in 1978, there was a sign of Islamist opposition with the rise of *Rabitat al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya* (the League of the Islamic Call) in the early 1980s. The growth of this movement coincided with worsening conditions in Algeria, namely, high unemployment, hyperinflation, overpopulation and migration (from rural areas to cities), agricultural failure and food shortage, educational decline, and exorbitant foreign debt, to mention the basic issues. For example, during 1980-1984 alone, the population grew from 18.3 million to 21.6 million.[12] Between 1982 and 1984, the number of unemployed grew by 200,000, the majority of this increase coming from young Algerians

entering the job market.[13] By 1986, it was estimated that nearly 75 percent of Algerians between ages 16 and 25 were without work.[14] These crises were compounded by an unexpected drop in energy prices in the mid-1980s. Given that Algeria's oil and gas revenues accounted for more than 90 percent of its exports, the fall in energy prices particularly limited the government's options in terms of finding alternative sources of hard currency. The inescapable result was economic stagnation and deterioration of social services. Algeria's foreign debt also increased from \$14.8 billion in 1984 to \$24.6 billion by 1987 as a direct consequence of the oil price collapse.[15]

Such issues gave rise to an economic liberalization and political relaxation by the successor regime of Chadli Benjedid. This shift, however, did not alleviate the economic problems. Similar to Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's policy of *infitah* (openness), Benjedid's moves created a new class of entrepreneurs and middlemen that were made rich by the opportunities of the open domestic economy, by international companies, or by connections to the ruling elite. According to a 1982-1983 survey, of 1,331 new entrepreneurs, 40 percent were managers of state companies or former military officers.[16] The lives of the majority of Algerians, on the other hand, continued to deteriorate, and the gap between the rich and the poor grew even wider. To those who were hit the hardest, the new openness seemed directed more toward meeting the requirements of integration into the global economy—as stipulated by the international financial agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the foreign lending governments, primarily the Western states—than toward healing the people's economic woes.[17]

The Islamists came to public prominence in the 1980s as a result of these circumstances. Under the League of the Islamic Call, however, the Islamist movement was largely disorganized. It had no coherent structure, concrete program, or central leadership. More important, at that early point, it was not a mass movement with an open political ambition. Rather, it was essentially in the mold of Muslim conservatism, demanding a moral and social overhaul in accordance with Islamic principles and revolving around a number of different leaders, such as Shaykh Ahmad Sahnoun, Shaykh Abd al-Latif Sultani, Abbas Madani, Mahfouz Nahnah, and Abdallah Jab. Hence, the Benjedid government did not see the movement as a threat and even implicitly acquiesced in the proliferation of its activities. This was caused by the concern to check the power of other contenders, namely radical Marxist students, hard-line Boumediennist socialists, the Berbers, and feminist groups. Utilizing the climate of political tolerance, the Islamists managed to build a network of independent mosques in major cities and towns throughout the 1980s.[18]

Despite the Islamic movement's growing power, throughout much of the 1980s, it remained largely limited as a coherent national force and rather manageable by the government. What marked its metamorphosis into a mass movement were the October 1988 food riots, which swept Algeria's major cities for roughly two weeks. The army's efforts to restore order were no remedy. On the contrary, the brutality with which the military attempted to quell the unrest by firing on protesters and rioters alike further deepened the crisis. An eventual death toll of 150 was acknowledged by the government, but most other estimates cited a figure at least three times as large.[19] Overall, the upheaval was revealing the dismal failure of Benjedid's policies and overwhelming rejection of the FLN-run state. The cure was thought to be democratization and free elections. In this respect, a new constitution adopted in February 1989 terminated the FLN's power monopoly and established a multi-party parliamentary democracy.

Under the new constitutional changes, the FIS came into existence out of this scene and crystallized as the principal Islamist movement when Abbas Madani and a group of radical Islamists, including Ali

Belhadj, split from the previously-established League of the Islamic Call and formed their own organization on February 18, 1989. Different from the newly-established secular parties, the FIS' fundamentalist Islamic doctrine put it on a collision course with the secularist-nationalist state structure. Although the FIS was an amalgam of divergent tendencies, the movement, nonetheless, was against the secular nation-state, calling for an Islamic system.[20]

The June 1990 municipal elections, the first free elections in 28 years following independence, showed up the strength of both secular and religious views. Although the common expectation, in the beginning, was that the FLN would be the victorious side because of its nearly 30-year control of the political process, the results were quite the contrary. The FIS captured more than 55 percent of the municipal councils and about two-thirds of the provincial assemblies.[21] Likewise, in the first round of the national election, which was held in December 1991 and included more than 50 competing parties, the FIS emerged as the largest party, gaining 188 seats in the 430-seat national assembly.[22]

The overwhelming fundamentalist victory aroused the anxiety of many Algerians who feared the changes it portended. The FIS' general theocratic views were inimical to secular tradition and institutions. Its assured hegemony in parliament and its coveting of the presidency augured an altered constitution and the founding of Shari'a.

Certainly, such prospects would have derailed the nascent democratic process, but the army, the real power center in Algeria, was quick to step in and stymie the process for the purpose of pushing the Islamists out of the political arena, despite the fact that Benjedid showed a willingness to share political power with the Islamists.[23] The first showdown occurred in May-June 1991, the year the FIS won its impressive victories in the local elections. Mass demonstrations and strikes protested changes in the election laws, largely in favor of the FLN candidates. Clashes with the Islamists and military resulted in dozens of deaths, the arrest of about 3,000—including the leader Abbas Madani and his top lieutenant, Ali Belhadj—the imposition of martial law for about four months, and the suspension of the scheduled national election.[24]

The army crackdown and the lack of leadership put the Islamist movement increasingly under the influence of the extremists, who sought to radicalize it. Many radical groups eventually left the FIS to form the rebellious groups that have been battling with the security forces. Chief among them were the Islamic Guards, the Algerian Afghans (veterans of the Afghan *mujahidin* struggle against the Soviet occupation), the Apostasy and Flight Organization, and the al-Jazara (a group that has become radicalized in the wake of government suppression). These groups later coalesced to form two major militant clusters: the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS- the military wing of the FIS).[25]

Meanwhile, shortly after the military takeover, a five-man High State Council was formed to fill the presidency, and Muhammad Boudiaf, a revolutionary war hero in exile in Morocco since 1965, was called upon to be its head. In fact, the council was the handmaiden of the military formed to provide a semblance of legitimacy for indirect army rule, and Boudiaf and successor presidents were mere figureheads appointed by the military.

The government, acting under a declared state of emergency, then arrested more of the FIS leaders and detained thousands of its supporters in desert camps, banned the party, annulled both the national and local elections, and dissolved the assemblies. The new regime also undertook drastic measures against the Islamists' autonomous networks centered mainly around their independent mosques, replacing

thousands of imams and closing down many private mosques. At the same time, those neighborhoods known as pro-Islamist were put under virtual siege by heavily armed security forces.[26]

In response, the Islamists declared a holy war in which senior state government officials, army and security officers, as well as political figures were the first targets. Boudiaf was assassinated in June 1992 and violence especially intensified after 1993, bringing the country close to implosion. Assassinations and indiscriminate car bombings in city streets wreaked havoc. Even the infrastructure—bridges, central warehouses, public buildings, power stations, and schools and institutions of higher education—could not escape the ravages of the radical Islamists. For instance, it is reported that in the year 1994 alone, there were 2,725 terrorist acts, inflicting physical damage on the infrastructure to the tune of \$2 billion.[27]

By resorting to severe violence, the ultimate purpose of the militant Islamists was to break the government's capability of functioning and bring it down. The government, however, responded to this strategy with more repression leading to further fragmentation of the Islamist movement. The government hunts down armed zealots with special forces (commonly called ninjas due to their masks); convenes special anti-terrorist courts that hand down death sentences and rather long prison terms; conducts sweeping raids of pro-Islamist, poor sections of Algiers; and wantonly violates personal liberties under the guise of state security.[28]

Yet the severe government repression, aided and supported also by the Algerian military, is not the only factor limiting the FIS to realize its ultimate objective of altering the secular state structure for a Shari'a state. Perhaps the most significant is the fact that the Islamists did not actually muster the mass support they asserted and thus failed to ignite a popular revolution like Ayatollah Khomeini's against the shah of Iran. Some segments of the Algerian society, though not supportive of the coup of FLN, are adamantly opposed to a fundamentalist takeover, especially in light of the Iranian and Sudanese examples. These include the majority of professional and business groups, a large number of intellectuals, academics and journalists, civil administrators, women's organizations, the Algerian trade union movement (UGTA), and socialist-secularist parties. Such liberal and predominantly middle-class cohorts remain committed to a secular vision of the state. Although they too wanted to change the closed power structure dominating the state since independence, the antifundamentalists surely did not want the Islamists as the agent of the change. Equally relevant, they have been rather repulsed by the radical Islamists' violent tactics, mentioning that the fundamentalists simply cannot be entrusted with the reins.[29]

Added to this cauldron is the all-significant ethnic factor in the sociocultural configuration of Algeria. The Berber areas, covering nearly 20 percent of the population and concentrated primarily in the Kabylie region near Algiers, are the strongholds of the leading socialist-secularist parties, such as the Socialist Forces Front (FFS) and the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD). They, in general, advocate a society which is secular, democratic, pluralist, and multicultural, opposing the thesis of the fundamentalists. From a cultural perspective, furthermore, the Berbers, albeit Muslims, are usually against Arabization, preferring French over Arabic—a legacy of colonial policy. In the same vein, they are against the imposition of Islamic law, some aspects of which contravene traditional Muslim customs. In fact, in the face of the Islamist threat, some Berbers have found themselves in the ironic position of having acquiesced to the very state power they have been opposed to for the purpose of escaping the Islamist alternative. Some others have taken up arms as part of the antiterrorist local militants, endorsed and supported by the government.[30]

Moreover, although the common belief is quite the contrary, a quick glance at the December 1991 national election actually reveals the lack of mass support with respect to the FIS. In that election, the number of

seats won by the three leading parties (FIS, 188; FFS, 25; and FLN, 15) is disproportionate to the number of votes, mainly due to the “winner takes all” or the absolute majority rule. To illustrate, the FLN received 1.5 million votes and the FFS 0.5 million, but the two combined got only 40 seats, slightly more than one-fifth of the seats accorded the FIS, which received about 3 million votes. Further, viewing the election mainly as a contest between two undesirable choices, that is, FLN versus FIS, almost 5 million Algerians, or more than 40 percent of the 13.2 million registered voters, did not cast ballots.[31] With this low turnout, the 3 million voters for the FIS accounted for less than 25 percent of the total electorate, certainly far less than a popular mandate. It is quite likely that many of these three million voters were cast more for change and reform than as expressions of party loyalty.

Regardless of these limitations, how to bridge the gap with the three million who voted for the FIS remained the greatest challenge the Algerian government faced. In government’s view, it was the economic crises of the 1980s that gave rise to revolutionary Islamism and thus, the fundamentalist threat could be best dealt with through economic healing. To this end, since the violent events of 1993, Algerian governments gave high priority to improvement of the economy. They both made internal reforms and sought financial support from international institutions and foreign nations. Such efforts became particularly evident in 1994 and 1995, when the Mokdad Sifi government took a series of radical steps to meet the conditions set by the IMF. It cut the budget deficit from 9.3 to 5.4 percent of gross national product by eliminating state subsidies on a wide range of food items and by reducing social welfare expenditures, devalued the currency (the *dinar*) by more than 40 percent, freed prices in accordance with a market economy, and liberalized trade and investment codes. In addition, the government sought to streamline, even privatize, the inefficient state-owned industries. All these led Algeria to receive additional IMF loans and extended fund arrangements, which alleviated the economic tension to a great extent, at least in the short-run.[32]

In addition to efforts on the economic front and using force against the militants to placate the hard liners, the Algerian government also opened direct contact with the jailed FIS leaders in an effort to defuse the crisis. Beginning in mid-January 1995, the Rome meeting of the Algerian opposition parties, under the auspices of the Saint Egidio Catholic Community, rekindled the prospects for a negotiated settlement. The eight political parties—the leading among them being the FLN, the FIS, and the FFS, which together won about 85 percent of the votes in the December 1991 national election—agreed on a national pact, called *al-Aqd al-Watani*. The agenda of the pact seeks the restoration of a democratic civil society under the rule of law and rejection of all forms of dictatorship regardless of its nature or form; adherence to constitutional principles and procedures based on the sovereign will of the people; respect for human rights and individual freedoms regardless of ethnic, religious, or linguistic differences; rejection of violence and indiscriminate killing of civilians and foreign nationals; and recognition of pluralism and multiculturalism in political and social life. The pact also asks for a lifting of the ban on the FIS and the convening of a national conference at which representatives of the government and of opposition parties would be empowered to prepare the groundwork for the free and pluralist elections.[33]

The government’s initial reaction to the Rome accord was to reject it entirely, but shortly after, it showed some flexibility and moderation in dealing with the opposition parties that endorsed the accord. For example, the government did not clamp down on their activities when their representatives, including those of the FIS, met in Algiers in late January 1995 to refine the proposals—a meeting that could not have taken place without government acquiescence. For the first time in almost four years, the government also allowed a public rally by the opposition in early June 1995 in Algiers, with FIS participation; about 10,000

people called for an end to the emergency rule and return to democracy. It even initiated contact with FIS leaders in the summer of 1995, but to no avail.

Meanwhile, the ruling establishment pressed ahead with plans for an early presidential election in November 1995, followed by parliamentary and local elections in 1997. These elections, however, did not induce a reconfiguration of the Algerian political elite; rather, they confirmed the existing power structure, sustained by the military-technocratic-administrative alliance. In fact, the overt victory of President Zeroual, the regime-backed candidate winning over 61 percent of the votes, probably strengthened the regime's determination to maintain the status quo and to exclude the outlawed FIS. Following his election – actually re-election- President Zeroual ran on a platform of reaching out to the secular and moderate Islamic opposition, suppressing the hard-line Islamists. Since the elections were held in an atmosphere of terror created by Islamist extremists, it is widely believed that people voted more for order than for their true ideologies.[34]

Nevertheless, militant Islamist groups were forced to adapt to new realities largely because of the way in which the internal environment shifted against them. The elections and referendums undertaken repeatedly since President Zeroual's first election in 1994 exposed the militant groups and alienated them from the public. In this climate, the AIS declared a ceasefire on September 21, 1997, whereby it wanted to distance itself from ongoing massacres that tainted the image of Islamists and made the movement more vulnerable in the face of the state's efforts to wipe it out. The armed struggle, the AIS claimed, had given opportunists a chance to exploit religion and distort its message. As one AIS chief stated, "We do not wish for Islam, which is part of our identity, to become distorted in Algeria at the hands of Algerians." The ceasefire, he added, intended to "lift the cover of the conspirators against religion." [35]

Yet AIS's ceasefire did not receive an official response from the state until 1999. In the April of that year, Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika was elected President of Algeria under controversial circumstances. His ascension, however, received the support of Madani Mezraq, who issued a cordial letter to Bouteflika, praising him and reaffirming that the AIS had completely abandoned the armed struggle against the regime. Mezraq also volunteered the services of the AIS to fight the armed groups who continued to shed the blood of Algerians. In return, the presidency issued an open letter promising to give the 1997 ceasefire declaration a legal and political cover. Shortly after, President Bouteflika began to release political prisoners and, more importantly, pushed through the Law of Civil Reconciliation (*al-Wi'am al-Madani*), which extended amnesty to rebels whose hands were not soiled with blood and who had not placed bombs in public places. The law also promised to reduce the sentences of those who continued any of the aforementioned crimes, with the maximum sentence not exceeding 12 years in prison. The Law of Civil Reconciliation did not involve the AIS, which benefited from a general amnesty because of its 1997 ceasefire.

President Bouteflika's efforts to entice rebels to put down their arms did bear fruit at the end of 1999. The AIS began to disband its militias under state supervision, and with reassurances that they would be able to return to their homes unmolested. According to government figures, as many as 4,200 AIS rebels took advantage of the general amnesty granted by the regime.[36] Although the reconciliation efforts resulted in an overall decrease in the level of religiously-inspired violence, the problem did not disappear, nevertheless. Estimates vary, but around 200 people were said to be killed every month by radical Islamist groups after the reconciliation attempts.

Following the September 11, 2001 tragedy, the Algerian government renewed its battle against Islamist extremism. The American war against terrorism was interpreted as a virtual *carte blanche* to act against

the local Islamists. The government also offered full cooperation with the United States after the bombing of the World Trade Center and Pentagon, and there has been intelligence sharing since then in light of the fact that the al-Qa'ida network had links with the Algerian militant groups, such as the GIA.[37]

By 2002, the main guerrilla groups had either been destroyed or had surrendered, taking advantage of the amnesty program. In the meantime, the government has been allowing amnestied militants to speak out. This showed the extent of the splits within the militant movements themselves, demonstrating to some extent the success with which the security forces and intelligence operatives infiltrated and undermined the militant groups.

The release of FIS leaders Madani and Belhadj in 2003 had no observable effect on the situation, illustrating a newfound governmental confidence—which would be deepened by the 2004 presidential election, in which Bouteflika was reelected by 85 percent with support from two major parties and one faction of the third major party. The vote was seen as confirming strong popular support for Bouteflika's policy towards the guerrillas and the successful termination of large-scale violence.

In September 2005, a national referendum was held on an amnesty proposal by Bouteflika's government to end legal proceedings against individuals who were no longer fighting and to provide compensation to families of people killed by government forces. The controversial Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation was declared to have won with 97 percent support, and with 80 percent of participation.[38]

The proposal was implemented by Presidential decree in February 2006, and adopted on September 29, 2006. Particularly controversial was its provision of immunity against prosecution to surrendered ex-guerrillas (for all but the worst crimes) and army personnel (for any action "safeguarding the nation"). Nevertheless, it is reported that over 400 guerrillas surrendered under its terms.[39]

Since then, the fighting has continued to die down, but small numbers of armed militants persist in confronting government forces and carrying out isolated attacks on villages and other types of terrorist attacks. Particularly evident among them is the GSPC, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, a splinter group of the GIA. The GSPC, initially based on the fringes of Kabylie, was established in 1998 to dissociate itself from the massacres. However, despite its former repudiation of attacking non-combatants, it eventually returned to killing civilians and in October 2003, publicly endorsed al-Qa'ida.[40] The GSPC rejected the amnesty and has continued to fight, although many individual members have surrendered. While as of 2010, its comparatively sparse activities—mainly in mountainous parts of the east—are the only remaining fighting in Algeria, a complete end to the violence is not yet in sight.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

At present, it seems that the conflict between the Algerian government and mainstream FIS movement has been managed, but not resolved entirely. The gap between the government and many radical Islamists still remains wide. The hardliners on the government side dislike militant Islamists in the extreme, viewing them as terrorists and enemies of the state that must be eliminated. More moderate elements in the government favor dialogue and are apparently willing to live with a less ideological Islam. Yet this requires a softening of militant Islamists' ideological stance on the issue of an Islamist state and a renunciation of jihad as a legitimate means of struggle. It is doubtful that the militant Islamist groups will go

that far to reconcile themselves with the status quo and to accept the secular premises of the Algerian state. On the other hand, the military is continuing to perform its customary role as the supreme arbiter of national politics and protector of the secular state. The military-bureaucratic-secularist power elites appear determined to prevail against the Islamist threat. Given that, radical Islamists do not seem to have a chance of tearing down the existing power structure, but their violent campaigns are likely to continue till a more satisfying solution is found.

As the above discussions attest, some aspects of Islamist extremism in Algeria are tied to literal interpretations of Islam in that many Muslims believe that they are rightfully entitled to an Islamic state because Islam does not separate politics from everyday life. To these, a small minority, to be sure, an Islamic order cannot be brought about through piecemeal reforms only; thus, state power must be seized, forcibly if needed, to implement the “true” vision of Islam. Accordingly, they resort to violence either defensively or offensively. Then there are radical Islamists who interpret the concept of jihad in a way that struggle against perceived non-Muslims is obligatory by all means.

Dealing with this “blind” side of Islamist extremism will be exceptionally difficult. On the academic front, wider studies are needed on those individuals and militant Islamist groups that are motivated by a literal interpretation of Islam and that are strongly committed to violent tactics, an area which has not been explored well thus far. On the political front, better intelligence and effective use of security forces may reduce the likelihood of immediate threat.

Yet this study also reveals that militant Islamists of this kind do not constitute a large number in the whole movement of political Islamism. Indeed, the vast majority of Islamists condemns and has been against violence as a way to remove the secular state in favor of an Islamist one. The appeal of mainstream political Islam has more to do with undesirable domestic conditions, particularly, economic distress, widespread poverty, and unjust distribution of national wealth. It is not a coincidence that the religious opposition in Algeria became a major threat to the regime right after the food riots of 1988. Hence, healing the economic distress, in particular, and undesirable local conditions, in general, should be the area in which future peace efforts must go.

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