

Special Report

Algeria Emerges From Obscurity as a Leading Mediator in War on Terrorism

By *Marvine Howe*



Algerian author Kamel Daoud. (PHOTO M. HOWE)

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After a long eclipse, Algeria has returned to the international scene with a compelling message: We lived through the Arab Spring before anyone else; we've been vaccinated against terrorism and are ready to share our expertise.

Clearly concerned over the troubled situation in the region and possible contagion on its borders, a revived Algerian diplomacy is promoting dialogue with radical insurgents in half a dozen African countries.

Also with the blessings of the United States, Algiers hosted an International Conference on Deradicalization in late July, grouping 50 countries and international organizations, as a precursor to the Global Counterterrorism Forum at the United Nations in September.

Algiers has developed a counter-terrorism model based on its experience of 15 years of *jihadist* assaults, assassinations, kidnappings and massacres, and merciless response by security forces. To end this unbridled violence, which left some 200,000 people dead, the Algerian government of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika embarked on a program to reintegrate Islamic extremists into civil society. In the fall of 2005, the exhausted nation voted for the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, culminating in a generous amnesty for nearly all concerned.

It is too early to say whether the Algerian approach can be exported—or, indeed, if it works. Nevertheless, it has provided Algeria with relative stability and won accolades both at home and abroad.

“We have a long history of mediation, from helping free the American hostages in Iran, and negotiating an end to the Iraq-Iran and Ethiopia-Eritrean conflicts,” senior government official Abdelaziz Benali Cherif emphasized in a recent interview. “But there followed the dark years, when we were alone in fighting terrorists, who openly claimed attacks on women, journalists, teachers...,” recalls Benali Cherif, director general of communications, information and documentation at Algeria’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “The world, however, was completely deaf and blind to *jihadist* crimes and blamed us for being inflexible on terrorism. The terrorists were viewed as victims, but the real victims were the people. Only after Sept. 11, 2001 did the rest of the world begin to understand what Algerians had endured from terrorism.”

Algeria first emerged as a post-colonial leader of the non-aligned world in the wake of its bloody, seven-year war for independence from France in 1962. The wartime leadership established a one-party authoritarian state, made palatable by generous social subsidies from oil and gas wealth. The collapse of the price of hydrocarbons in mid-1986

led to what Algerians call “our Arab Spring” in October 1988: rioting in the streets and brutal retaliation by the military, leaving hundreds of dead and wounded.

The government then introduced broad democratic reforms, resulting in impressive victories for the newly formed Islamic Salvation Front in local and parliamentary elections. Stunned by the Islamist triumph, the regime cancelled the national elections in early 1992, dissolved parliament and terminated the democratic experiment. This engendered a vicious cycle of fierce terrorist assaults and harsh military response. Algeria sank into turmoil and near oblivion.

Determined to end the bloodletting, Bouteflika, elected president in 1999, passed a Law on Civil Concord. This partial amnesty was criticized by human rights groups, and the violence continued. Most Algerians were desperate for peace and finally voted for Bouteflika’s Reconciliation Charter. Nevertheless, many still speak of Reconciliation as a betrayal of the victims. Aïssa Rahmoune, vice président of the Algerian League for Human Rights, points out that families of the missing still demonstrate every week for Truth and Justice. “The 2005 Charter brought neither peace nor justice, only injustice and impunity,” Rahmoune commented recently.

“Deradicalization: a strategic absurdity” was the headline of the daily *Liberté* in response to official attempts to present Algeria’s Reconciliation policy as an example, in the wake of a recent terrorist ambush leaving nine soldiers dead and two wounded. While public order has been restored, the terrorist threat remains in the wings. On Jan. 16, 2013, gunmen linked to al-Qaeda seized the Saharan gas plant of In Amenas, operated by BP, Norway’s Statoil and Algeria’s Sonatrach. After a three-day siege, the army regained control, releasing some 700 hostages, but 39 staff, mostly foreigners, and 29 terrorists were dead. Since then, the military has reported killing one or two armed terrorists in weekly clashes in remote mountainous areas.

“A Good Partner”

The country’s isolation, however, has eased, although visas are still hard to come by. In the past five years, Algiers has become an important stopover for international leaders from Europe, mainly former colonial power France, the United States, China, Venezuela and Iran, as well as Arab and African rulers. In Western diplomatic circles, Algeria is invariably referred to as “a good partner” in three main areas: regional stability, counterterrorism and economic relations.

The government seems determined to pursue its activist foreign policy. A cabinet reshuffle in May anointed two ministers of foreign affairs. Ramtane Lamamra, who is credited with resurrecting Algerian diplomacy from the doldrums, was named minister of state and minister of foreign affairs charged with international cooperation, while his former delegate, Abdelkader Messahel, was promoted to the post of minister charged with North Africa, the African Union and Arab League Affairs.

Lest anyone misinterpret the Foreign Ministry’s campaign for dialogue as a sign of weakness, the army issued a stern warning to would-be terrorists in the June issue of its organ *El Djeich*. Emphasizing that an important number of terrorists have been eliminated and sizable quantities of arms recovered, the army reaffirmed its “determination to work relentlessly to defend the borders from criminal infiltration until the final eradication of terrorism.”

Most recently, Algiers has been widely praised for engineering the Accord of Peace and Reconciliation between the government of Mali and radical separatist groups. The Arab League applauded Algeria’s mediation efforts in the Mali crisis, and the European Union hailed Algiers as an “important strategic partner.” In greetings on Algeria’s Independence Day, President Barack Obama stressed the importance of Algiers’ diplomatic efforts to achieve peace and security in the region, particularly in Libya and Mali.

Benali Cherif, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, stressed that the Mali peace talks have “all chances to succeed this time because the international community is involved.” He noted that Algeria has resumed participation in the U.N.-sponsored dialogue with Libyan groups and that there have been “positive steps.” Other countries in Africa and elsewhere have asked for Algeria’s help because of its extensive experience in the fight against terrorism.

Even the government’s most outspoken critics generally approve of its role as regional peacemaker and its refusal to join Arab forces fighting in Syria and Yemen. Omar Belhouchet, publisher of the opposition daily *El Watan*, described the mediation in Mali, Libya and Tunisia as “humane and necessary.” Nevertheless, he pointed out that Algeria’s authoritarian regime has made important concessions to Islamists at home, bowing to protests against liberalizing the sale of alcohol, condoning attacks on a student over the length of her dress, and allowing death threats against

journalists like Kamel Daoud, winner of France's 2014 Prix Goncourt and author of the acclaimed novel *The Meursault Investigation*. With total impunity, radical Imam Abdelfateh Hamadache issued a *fatwa* against Daoud as an "apostate." The imam has stirred new controversy declaring that if he were president he would let the Islamic State open an embassy in Algeria.

During a recent debate on "The Arab Spring Year Four" at Lisbon's Gulbenkian Foundation, Daoud publicly accused the Algerian regime of making "a deal" with Islamists to end the violence. "The ruling team agreed to control the power and money and leave the streets to the false prophets," he asserted.

Some analysts see Algiers' focus on foreign policy as an attempt to enhance its image abroad since it is unable to resolve intractable domestic problems. Among these, there is the looming financial crisis. Algeria is dependent on oil and gas for 97 percent of its export earnings. With falling prices of hydrocarbons, the state lost 50 percent of its revenue in the past year. There have been repeated calls for diversification, but to little avail.

Then there's the administration's incapacity to resolve deep-rooted ethnic disputes such as that between Arabs and the minority Ibadi Berbers of the M'zab Valley in the Sahara. In early July, long-simmering problems exploded when masked gunmen attacked the town of Guerrara, leaving 25 dead—mostly Berbers—and many wounded amid widespread destruction. Even the pro-government press faulted the regime for resorting to security forces to restore calm and failing to tackle basic causes of the violence.

Casting a shadow over political life is the succession question, with opposition parties openly speaking of a "power vacuum." President Bouteflika, who suffered a severe heart attack in 2013, was elected to a fourth term last year (see June/July 2014 *Washington Report*, p. 30), but appears in public only for wheelchair photo ops. The country is said to be run by a political-military group around the president who seem increasingly at odds among themselves.

"The regime thinks that international legitimacy is more important than legitimacy at home," Daoud remarked in an interview. "We need a generational change. We are still ruled by the generation that waged the war for independence 60 years ago, leaders who are old and sick. There's no alternative because they have not let young leaders emerge." □

Marvine Howe, former New York Times bureau chief in Ankara, is the author of Al Andalus Rediscovered: Iberia's New Muslims and Other Minorities.

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