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Algeria's Crisis Outlook and Regional Implications

Dalia Ghanem

State of Affairs

Algeria, the largest country in Africa by land area, one of Europe's top three gas suppliers and a pivotal security actor, has been shaken by mass protests since February 22, 2019. These [peaceful](#) and civic protests were born from Algerians' resentment towards their ailing eighty-two year old President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to run for a fifth term after twenty years in power. For twenty-five consecutive weeks, Algerians of all ages and classes have been demonstrating every Friday throughout the country to show their disapproval to their leaders and to demand an overhaul of their political system.

The leaderless movement took the regime off guard and compelled the military, headed by the Chief of Staff and Vice-Minister of Defense Ahmed Gaïd Salah, to shift its loyalty. Within five weeks, the military abandoned President Bouteflika and pushed him to step down. In application of [article 102](#) of the constitution, Head of the National Popular Assembly (APN) Abdelkader Bensalah was appointed interim president in a caretaker government.

In addition, the military pressured several personalities close to former President Bouteflika to resign, such as Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia and his predecessor, Abdel Malek Sellal. Other figures such as former intelligence chief, Athmane Tartag, and former head of the Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS), General Mohamed Mediène, were arrested along with several [business](#) tycoons who were detained on corruption charges.

Despite these measures, Algerians have not quieted. A majority of protesters perceive these actions to be purges conducted by the military leadership to cast off rivals and square accounts with foes. Protesters are asking for the resignation of Bensalah and his caretaker government. They are also demanding a longer transition period and no elections for the moment. While the last point is valid — as current conditions are not conducive to free and fair elections, other demands remain vague and inoperative. For instance, the demand for a longer transition period did not develop into a clear roadmap with a defined timeframe. Similarly, the insistence on the departure of all figures and civil servants who served under Bouteflika is unlikely to occur. Moreover, there is no agreement on who should head the state in a post-Bouteflika era. In addition, the movement's obstinate commitment not to have leadership (even a collegial one) to draft concrete demands and open a dialogue with the authorities is a complicating issue.

However, small steps have been made. Indeed, on June 15, the "National Conference of the dynamics of the civil society" was [held](#). It was composed of over one hundred people coming from the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions, which includes thirteen unions and other corporate groups; the Civil Forum for Change, composed of seventy local and national associations; and finally, the Collective of the Civil Society, which brought together twenty organizations and unions. This is a first step as participants agreed for the first time on a transition period between six months and a year

while they remain uncertain about the way forward and the prerequisites to opening dialogue with authorities. As for the opposition, its efforts to surf on the wave of the popular movement and to convince people of their capacities have all failed miserably. More recently, some figures of the opposition established the National Coordination for Change (CNC), a group composed of socialists as well as Islamists. It was brazenly rejected by the popular movement and failed to reach a consensus.

On the other hand, the military's attitude towards the people's demands, their intransigence, and their bureaucratic rigidity to insist on organizing elections despite the absence of candidatures, an opaque legal framework and the weakness of the judiciary are all highly problematic. Moreover, the military is showing signs of increasing assertiveness. The authorities banned all protest and public assembly, with permission only granted on Fridays. In one of his latest [statements](#), while insisting on "the convergence of visions between the Army and the people", Gaïd Salah, required demonstrations to be "characterized by a reasonable and sufficient level of organization and effective supervision" and urged the people to stop "certain irrational demands, such as the collective departure of all State officials".

Gaïd Salah also condemned protest demands as being "non-objective and unreasonable" and even "dangerous and malicious". Nonetheless, the obstinacy of Algerians seems even stronger than that of the military leadership as Algerians reaffirmed their demands. Demonstrations are expanding and have remained [peaceful](#) despite police provocations. Since April, the police have been acting more firmly with measures such as repressing and jailing protesters. The police are also increasingly using tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannons and Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD) commonly called "[sound canons](#)". The signs of the intransigence of the leadership are clear and the risk of the use of coercive measures in the upcoming weeks to suppress peaceful protesters cannot be ruled out.

The Impact of the Algerian Crisis on Its Neighbors

Algeria is the largest country in Africa by landmass, and a pivotal actor in the stability of North Africa and the neighboring Sahel region. As a result, the fear of neighboring countries about the situation in Algeria is legitimate. The destabilization of the Maghreb's central state might have important regional consequences and might impact Europe as well. Indeed, Algeria shares maritime borders with Italy and Spain and has — due to its geographic proximity and colonial legacy — a privileged relationship with France.

Tunisia: A Committed Reserve

While Tunisian citizens have been active on social media encouraging their Algerian neighbors in their fight for democracy, the Tunisian authorities were uncommunicative, prevented demonstrations in support of Algerians and took tight security measures to protect the Algerian embassy in Tunis. Except three declarations from the late Tunisian Head of State, Mohamed Beji Caid Essebsi, the Tunisian authorities remained cautious and silent since the beginning of the demonstrations. Tunisia fears a contamination of Algeria's political unrest, is worried about a further destabilization of Algeria and seeks not to provoke the dismay of Algiers and risk losing the country's status as a "big brother" or "protector".

There were three declarations from the Tunisian President Essebsi, an old friend of former President Bouteflika (1999-2019). Essebsi [declared](#) at the beginning of the protests in February: "The Algerian people are free to express themselves as they wish on their governance". A month later, in March, Essebsi [explained](#) that he had confidence in "the ability of Algerians to show wisdom". Finally, in April, Essebsi [declared](#) after the departure of Bouteflika that "Algerians are cognizant of the risks that a conflict entails and can overcome the situation, because they experienced similar circumstances in the past".

The silence of the Tunisian authorities, political leaders, unions and media stems from the fear of provoking a diplomatic incident with the “big brother” (as Tunisians call Algeria) and being accused of interference. The Tunisian authorities know that any declaration today will be held against them tomorrow and might have serious economic and security repercussions. The silence is hence *de rigueur*.

In 2011, at the beginning of the Arab spring, Algeria was one of the first countries in the MENA region to provide aid to Tunisia, providing the country with nearly [\\$100 million](#) in financial assistance. Tunisia cannot afford to be on bad terms with Algiers as there is too much at stake. Besides historical relations, the two countries have strong economic and security ties.

On an economic level, Algeria ranks [fifth](#) among the biggest importers of Tunisian products after the countries of the European Union and Turkey. Tunisia relies on Algerian hydrocarbons — 95 percent of Algerian direct exports to Tunisia are hydrocarbons — and in 2018, Algeria exported [€425 million in hydrocarbons](#). The Algerian national company SONATRACH and the Tunisian National Oil Company (ETAP) have joined forces for the exploitation of the Kaloudia offshore block (south of the Gulf of Hammamet) and a joint company called *Numhyd* was created in 2003.

The two countries have signed a series of agreements to strengthen their energy cooperation, including the increase of the electricity interconnection capacity, the increase of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) exports to Tunisia, and the supply of Algerian gas to Tunisian border regions. More recently, in January 2019, Tunisia was harshly hit by a cold wave and had a severe shortage in its LPG for domestic use. Algeria stepped in and sent [4,000 tons of gas](#) by boat within 48 hours.

In addition, there is the [Trans-Mediterranean Natural Gas pipeline](#), which begins from Algeria's largest onshore gas field Hassi R'mel and runs 550Km to Tunisia, passing from El Houaria and crossing to the Sicilian section. For this, Tunisia receives a six percent right of way. In addition, Algeria has more than [fifty](#) production units in Tunisia with 39 industrial companies, 13 in the services industry, three in agriculture and one specialized in tourism which all participate in job creation.

Besides, Algerians contribute directly to the economic life in Tunisia as one out of three tourists to Tunisia are Algerian. In 2015 when Europeans feared visiting Tunisia after the terrorist attack in Sousse which caused the death of 38 people, Algerians mobilized on social media and flew [massively](#) that same summer to Tunisia in solidarity with their Tunisian neighbors. While European tourists feared for their security and travel agents cancelled thousands of trips to Tunisia causing, according to the Tunisian Minister of Tourism, a loss of [€450 million](#), some [2 million](#) Algerians spent their vacation in Tunisia. There were around [8,000](#) Algerians that crossed the Tunisian border every day throughout summer of 2015. Similarly, out of the 8 million tourists, [2.7 million](#) were Algerians in 2018.

On the security level, Tunisia has tight security relations with the North African behemoth that has one of the most modern and professional armies in the region. The Algerian army, the People's National Army (PNA), along with intelligence and security services, plays a crucial role in the protection of the 1,034 km of borders with Tunisia. They deal with border security, crisis management and counterterrorism. It is believed that there are around [25,000](#) Algerian soldiers deployed at the borders to protect it mainly against terrorist attacks and smuggling activities, especially arm trafficking from Libya, with which Tunisia shares some 460 km of borders.

The two countries [multiplied](#) their bilateral cooperation on border security and information sharing. In 2012, the two neighbors signed a border security agreement to better coordinate joint patrols and counterterrorism activities. As a result, the Joint Intelligence Unit was created, and due to its efforts several attacks by jihadist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or Uqba Bin Nafi battalion were foiled. The Joint Intelligence Unit saw tangible results with the killing of the leader of Uqba Bin Nafi battalion, Khaled Hamadi al-Shayeb, called Abu Sakhr and two of his lieutenants. Hamadi

was the mastermind behind the attack against the [Interior Minister](#) in 2014 as well as the [Bardo museum](#) in 2015. While it is true that a jihadist activity in the region of the Mont Chaambi remains, it is also true that the region is no longer the sanctuary for jihadist groups that it used to be, and this is mainly due to the Algerian army and its efforts to maintain pressure on jihadist groups and cut their supply routes.

In addition, Algeria plays an important role in terms of training and capacity-building of the Tunisian security forces. Algeria — enriched with its ten years of experience in the fight against jihadist violence in the 1990s — has been training Tunisians in counter-terrorism tactics. Since the beginning of the Arab spring in 2011, the Tunisians have been sending numerous delegations from the Army, the Air Force and the Intelligence to Algeria. For instance, the Elite Rapid Intervention Units of the Algerian Gendarmerie provided training to its Tunisian counterparts with [courses](#) in strategy, criminology and forensics.

On the political level, there is fear over the implications of the Algerian popular movement on domestic politics. Algeria welcomed and actively supported the agreement between progressive parties and the Islamist-inspired Ennahda that was reached under the leadership of then-leader of Nidaa Tounes Essebsi and Rashid Ghannouchi, chairman of Ennahda in 2013. For Algiers, back then, it was crucial not to exclude the Islamists to avoid destabilizing Tunisia as it feared the reproduction of an Algerian scenario. Today, this relationship with the Islamists is of paramount as Tunisia is preparing for legislative and presidential elections in autumn 2019.

Tunis fears seeing Algeria transformed into a source of instability, ending up with another neighbor, in addition to Libya, plunged into chaos. Moreover, the country does not want to lose its “protector”. Tunis knows that it cannot afford to upset Algiers or alienate the regime, which can retaliate, for instance, by lessening its security on the borders or by cutting off its electricity and gas supplies.

Morocco: A Cautious Mutism

Morocco and Algeria share some 1900 km of borders that have been closed since 1994 when Morocco imposed a visa on Algerians after the attack of Marrakech in August 1994. The two heavy weights of the Maghreb have tense relationships due to the Western Sahara issue. The Polisario Front is supported by the Algerian regime in its calls for a referendum on self-determination. The Cherifian kingdom, that annexed this former Spanish colony in 1975, refuses any solution other than autonomy under its sovereignty.

Similar to Tunisia, Morocco has been silent since the beginning of the protests in Algeria on February 22. While ordinary Moroccans showed support for their Algerian counterparts and admired their ability to remain peaceful, the government made no statement until compelled to do so. It began after a rumor went viral on social media subsequent to the publication of a piece accusing Morocco, France, the U.S. and Serbia of organizing “[the destruction of Algeria](#)” via shadow agencies located in Morocco.

As a result, the Moroccan foreign minister, Nasser Bourita, published a [statement](#) in March calling these “fallacious statements” and insisting that Morocco “has decided to stick to an attitude of non-interference with recent developments in Algeria and abstained from commenting on this”. Bourita added that Morocco “strongly rejects the false allegation of coordination with other countries, including France, on the events in Algeria. No contact has been established with Paris, nor with any other country in Europe or elsewhere on this subject”.

The fear of being accused of interference went as far as having the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ask the second major Moroccan public channel, 2M, to [cancel](#) a political talk show called “*Moubacharat* *Maakoum*” [On Live with you] that scheduled a discussion on the popular movement in Algeria.

For Morocco, Algeria has always been a bellwether. The Berber spring in Algeria inspired then Moroccan King Hassan II to anticipate the demands of the people and initiate reforms. Similarly, the advent of the Islamists in Algeria instilled fear in Morocco and pushed the King to have a more inclusive political agenda that included the Islamists. Likewise, in 2011, when the Arab spring shook the MENA region, both countries were quick to initiate reforms on political parties and participation, media and freedom of speech.

While Morocco has been able to keep the “Arab spring” at bay for now and has successfully neutralized through repression the Rif riots, the “[the demonstrations of thirst](#)” and the Jerada protests that have been shaking the country lately, it will not be able to silence dissents. The situation in Algeria and the highly peaceful and civic protests are a source of inspiration for many in the region and Moroccans in particular. Moroccans might not ask for the overhaul of the kingdom as Algerians are asking for the overhaul of the regime, they may not question the legitimacy of the King, however, they might be inspired by Algerians to demand more equity, better public services and social justice, as well as political change beyond the reforms that were initiated in 2011.

The Sahel

Like Morocco and Tunisia, Sahelian countries, mainly Mali, Mauritania and Niger, also have shown a high degree of reservation. Algeria is a pivotal actor in the “fight against terror” and an important powerbroker. They are cognizant that a possible destabilization of Algeria would have serious repercussions on its southern flanks.

It should be noted that Algeria is a founding and an active member of the African Union (AU), and it has occupied the peace and security commissioner position in the AU since 2004, as well as [counterterrorism coordinator](#). Algeria hosts the headquarters AU Mechanism for Police Cooperation (AFRIPOL), a pan-African organization aiming to foster police training and cooperation. Algeria was a leading actor in the Nouakchott Process, launched in 2013, with the aim of promoting regional security cooperation that created the New Partnership for Africa's Development ([NEPAD](#)). It is also an active member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League as well as the Global Counterterrorism Forum's.

In Mali, a country with 1300 km of common borders, Algeria played a crucial role during the French military operation Serval (2012-2014) against jihadists. The chaos that has been going on in Libya since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, the regional alliances and coalition formed between the various jihadist actors and armed groups that followed has had direct repercussions in Mali. A few months after the fall of the Gaddafi-regime, the Northern parts of Mali ended up in the hands of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). These groups [capitalized](#) on the adverse conditions in post-Gaddafi Libya to gain a foothold there and expand their activities to Tunisia, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Mauritania and Sudan. Eventually, the French intervened to put an end to the jihadist threat, however their intervention led to more instability in Mali and by extension the Sahel.

While Algeria did not intervene militarily, it opened its airspace to French military jetfighters, supplying them fuel free of charge, and beefed up its borders to prevent the withdrawal of jihadists. Moreover, Algiers interceded for the inter-Malian dialogue that took place between the political-military movements of Northern Mali and the central government.

In addition, Algeria played a crucial role by coordinating counterterrorism efforts with Mali and other Sahelian states such as Mauritania and Niger with which it established the *pays du Champs* [Core Countries] in 2010. The latter was the first regional security device with an operational dimension aiming at coordinating the security efforts of these four countries. Algeria also created the Joint

Operational Staff Committee (CEMOC) and the Fusion and Liaison Unit (UFL) to foster security cooperation between Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Chad. As a result, a possible destabilization of Algeria, a country that has for been years a source of stability, a major military power and a pivotal actor in the fight against terror will provoke much worse in the Maghreb, the Sahel, and by extension, Europe.

Europe

If Algeria enters a period of political and economic destabilization, Europe might witness the destabilization of its southern flanks and its security be put at risk. In a highly unstable region that has been shaken by waves of insecurity since 2011, Algeria (and Morocco) have been perceived by European leaders as islands of stability, the last bulwark against terrorism. In addition, Algeria is seen as a rampart against irregular migration, a peace broker and a crucial energy supplier. These factors shaped and will continue to shape Europe's relations with Algeria. It is hence safe to say that EU leaders will put their economy and security concerns on the top of their list when dealing with the current situation. It is enlightening to see that European capitals, except for Paris, abstained from commenting because in cases of unrest the stakes are enormous for the old continent.

On the economic level, the EU is Algeria's largest trading partner and absorbs the major part of Algerian international trade with [50.3 percent](#). Algeria is a strategic energy-trading partner for the European Union. In 2017, fuel and mining products made up [95.7 percent](#) of EU imports from Algeria against [94 percent](#) in 2016 and [87 percent](#) in 2014. In addition, Algeria is Europe's third-largest natural gas supplier with 84 percent of its liquefied natural gas (LNG) sent to Europe, principally to Italy, France and Spain for which Algeria's gas exports covered [55 percent](#) of its needs.

Besides, European countries such as France, Italy and Spain are Algeria's principal trading partners. Between 2002 and 2014, the bilateral trade between the EU and Algeria increased by 136 percent. In 2016, total trade between Algeria and Europe reached [€37.4 billion](#), making Algeria the EU's 20th partner for imports and [24th largest](#) partner for exports. Italy, Spain and France remain Algeria's top [export](#) destinations with €4.63 billion, €3.44 billion, and €3.04 billion, respectively.

On the security level, Algeria has become an important regional partner for the EU since 9/11 in terms of counterterrorism and deradicalization. Not only has the country been able to neutralize the jihadist threat that went from lethal to manageable in the country, but it succeeded in becoming one of the safest countries in the region and a serious example in terms of a Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) governance approach. As explained above, Algeria is a member of several regional and international organizations. In addition, with its C/PVE approach, its long experience and its well-trained and modern security apparatuses, Algeria has become since the end of the 1990s a reliable and robust security partner for the EU. It should be noted that in 2017, the Algerian People's National Army (PNA) ranked [27th out of 133 armies](#) worldwide and as the second most powerful army in Africa, after Egypt.

With an increased engagement of European countries in the Sahel, Algeria has become a pivotal partner for the EU in counterterrorism efforts. The Sahel has previously been described as [Europe's African border](#): for instance, Niger's uranium provides [20 percent](#) of the fuel for France's 58 nuclear reactors, which generate 75 percent of France's electricity, and Mauritania provides the EU with 23.4 percent of its ores and minerals. Not to mention that European interests such as companies and embassies in the region have at several times been attacked, in addition to the EU citizens who have been abducted.

In addition, there is the question of irregular migration. With the situation in Libya and the Sahel worsening, more refugees have been trying to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean. While it is

hard to make any predictions right now, it is also safe to say that if the situation worsens in Algeria, legal or illegal migration will remain an alternative.

Finally, some individual member states have more at stake, as is the case with France. The former colonial power has strong economic ties and interests. Algeria represents the [third largest market](#) for French exports outside the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). France is the leading investor in Algeria with some 500 companies established there. France is the top foreign employer with [40,000](#) people hired directly and nearly [100,000](#) hired indirectly. For instance, the giant car and motorcycle manufacturer Peugeot Citroen PSA has announced a [joint venture](#) with three Algerian companies to invest in the construction of a €100 million factory in Oran. The factory is expected to produce 75,000 cars annually which will allow PSA to reach its goal of selling [700,000](#) vehicles in the MENA region by the year 2021.

For France and Europe, the destabilization of the North African behemoth is synonymous with the loss of economic interests, especially the loss of its gas supplies, an increase of the terrorist threat and a severe migration crisis that would aggravate tensions between the two sides of the Mediterranean.

Conclusion

The leverage of neighboring countries is limited as Algerian decision-makers, especially the military, jealously protect their independence from outside influences. It should also be said that Algerians are also protective of the independence and integrity of their country and their warnings during the demonstrations not to meddle in Algerian affairs are clear. The declaration of French president Emmanuel Macron is a case in point. By [tweeting](#) "President Bouteflika's decision [to renounce a fifth term] opens new page for democracy in Algeria," the French president did no good for his [reputation](#) and the reputation of his country. The best way for Europe and neighboring countries is to uphold a benevolent strategy and adhere to the will of the majority of Algerians.

After 25 weeks of protests and a deep political impasse, it is now clear that the post-Bouteflika period is going to be bumpy. However, it is hard to forecast events in Algeria. One thing remains sure: options are limited to either reforms or repression. If the first option is chosen by the leadership, substantial reforms and changes to the constitutional rules must take place. The military will be able to negotiate with chosen civilian partners over the proposed changes to the system as well as its planned withdrawal of power while imposing its conditions to preserve its economic interests and corporatist ones, such as the authority over its budget, its modalities of recruitment, training and promotion criteria.

If the army pursues the second path, it will resort to coercive resources, and the transition will not take place. It is unclear whether the military would choose the second option. However, should they decide to do so, they will risk breaking their relationship with the people as they previously did during the riots of October 1988, the interruption of the electoral process in 1992 and the riots in Kabylia in 2001. This option risks undermining the cohesion of the army and may lead to a conflict between the political military and the professional one, between high-ranking officers and Non-commissioned Officers (NCOs) or junior officers.

Studies have shown that loyalty shifts opposed to military coups are more likely to produce transitions to democracy within three years. If this is to happen in Algeria, both the military and the people need to engage in an open dialogue for an acceptable transition that would satisfy the protesters' most pressing and important concerns, while reassuring the military that their corporate interests and institutional structures will be protected.

Dr. Dalia Ghanem is a Resident Scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, where her work examines political and extremist violence, radicalization, Islamism, and jihadism with an emphasis on Algeria. Dr. Ghanem was previously an El-Erian fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center. Additionally, she contributed to the implementation of several research projects including the Security Sector Restructuring and Transformation Project, the Arab Civil-Military Relationships Project, and the Syria Economic Reconstruction Project. Prior to joining Carnegie, she was a Teaching Associate at Williams College in Massachusetts and served as Research Assistant at the Center for Political Analysis and Regulation at the University of Versailles.

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Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Dr. Canan Atilgan
Director
Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean
Tunis, Tunisia
www.kas.de/poldimed
canan.atilgan@kas.de



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