

# **Algeria**

**Research Paper 97/57**

**14 May 1997**



Since the suspension of the electoral process at the beginning of 1992, the Algerian government has been fighting a bitter conflict with militant Islamic forces, which has cost at least 60,000 lives. This paper examines the rise of Islamism in Algeria and outlines political developments since 1992. With parliamentary elections being held in June 1997, it also analyses the prospects for a peaceful political solution to the crisis.

**Fiona M. Watson**  
**International Affairs and Defence**

**House of Commons Library**

---

Library Research Papers are compiled for the benefit of Members of Parliament and their personal staff. Authors are available to discuss the contents of these papers with Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

## CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
<b>I Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>II Historical background</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>III The rise of Islamism in Algeria</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>IV Suspension of the electoral process</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>V Polarization of the conflict</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>VI Escalating violence and the groups involved</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>VII Attempts at dialogue and the Sant'Egidio Platform for peace</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>VIII Presidential election</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>IX French policy in Algeria</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>X Referendum on the constitution</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>XI Recent violence</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>XII Parliamentary elections 1997</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>XIII Conclusions</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Sources and further reading</b>	<b>30</b>



## I Introduction

The crisis in Algeria found its catalyst in the suspension of the electoral process at the beginning of 1992 when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was on the verge of winning. The violence triggered by the suspension of the elections has led many to agree, in retrospect, with the sentiment expressed by one commentator that refusing the FIS its electoral victory was 'a remedy worse than the disease.'<sup>1</sup> There are varying reports of how many people have been killed during this period of 'civil war' in Algeria, ranging from 60,000 to 120,000. An opportunity to resolve the conflict may have been lost after the presidential election in November 1995, which conferred a certain amount of legitimacy on President Zeroual and appeared to give Zeroual a mandate to pursue peace. Instead of implementing a peace programme, however, President Zeroual moved away from a political solution based on the Sant'Egidio platform and intensified the recruitment of self-defence militia groups. This 'privatisation' of the war in turn destabilised Algerian society further and intensified the cycle of violence by increasing the number of vendettas and reprisals carried out by armed groups. As a result and despite stringent efforts to suppress the Islamist insurgency, Algeria has moved no closer towards political stability. Arab commentators warn that, with the government and Islamist rebels locked into more rigid positions than ever, Algeria appears to be sliding towards total war, with implications for North Africa and Europe. It is against this background that Algeria plans to hold parliamentary elections on 5 June 1997, the first since the cancellation of the 1991 elections.

---

<sup>1</sup> Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo, quoted in the *Financial Times*, 28 December 1994.

## II Historical background

Algeria is the largest country in the Maghreb<sup>2</sup>. The Mediterranean Sea meets the north coast, Mali and Niger lie to the south, Tunisia and Libya lie to the east and Morocco and Mauritania lie to the west. Algeria was conquered by French forces in the 1830s and annexed by France in 1842. For most of the colonial period, official French policy was to populate the territory with French settlers and many French citizens became permanent residents. Unlike most of France's overseas possessions, Algeria was not formally a colony, but was 'attached' to metropolitan France. On 1 November 1954 the main Algerian nationalist movement, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) instituted a war of independence. This turned into a bitter, protracted conflict which killed or injured approximately one million Muslims and also left a mark on the French national psyche. The French government conceded a cease-fire in March 1962 and Algerian independence was declared on 3 July 1962. In September 1962 the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria was proclaimed, following the election of the National Constituent Assembly. Shortly afterwards a new government was formed under the premiership of Ahmed Ben Bella, founder of the FLN. This resulted in the emigration from Algeria of about one million French settlers.

In August 1963 the Constituent Assembly adopted a draft constitution which provided for a presidential regime with the FLN as the sole party. This was later agreed in a popular referendum and Ben Bella was elected President. Ben Bella went on to lay the foundations for a single-party socialist state. The ensuing failure of the FLN to function as an active political force left real power with the bureaucracy and the army and resulted in a bloodless coup in June 1965 which saw Ben Bella deposed by the Minister of Defence, Col Houari Boumedienne, who took over as President of a Council of the Revolution. In June 1975 Boumedienne announced a series of measures to consolidate the regime and enhance his personal power, including the drafting of a National Charter, which formulated the principles and plans for creating a socialist system and maintaining Islam as the state religion, and a new constitution. At the same time presidential and parliamentary elections were held. The former consolidated Boumedienne's hold on power and the latter saw the election of FLN members to the National People's Assembly.

Boumedienne died in December 1978 and the Council of the Revolution took over the government. An FLN congress in January 1979 adopted a new party structure, comprising a Central Committee headed by a Secretary General who would automatically become the sole presidential candidate. The Committee selected Col Ben Djedid Chadli as presidential candidate and this was subsequently endorsed by popular referendum. Chadli was seen as a compromise between liberal and radical aspirants for the presidential post. Anticipating constitutional changes that transpired in June 1980, which made the appointment of a Prime

---

<sup>2</sup> Region of north-west Africa, comprising Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and part of Libya.

Minister obligatory, Chadli appointed Col Muhammad Abd al-Ghani as Prime Minister. Chadli was re-elected President in January 1984 and shortly afterwards initiated a public debate on Boumedienne's National Charter. This resulted in the adoption of a new National Charter which envisaged a state ideology based on the twin principles of socialism and Islam. Legislation was adopted by a new, enlarged National Assembly in July 1987 allowing for the formation of local organizations without prior government approval, although a ban remained on associations that were thought to oppose the policies of the Charter or to threaten national security.

### III The rise of Islamism in Algeria

The definition of Islamism is 'The religious system of the Muslims'<sup>3</sup>. Based on the teachings of the Koran, it advocates the adherence to strict principles with an emphasis on religious forces interacting with social, cultural and economic factors. A large part of this includes an emphasis on community and values and it is this social welfare network that forms a broad part of the appeal of Islam in a country like Algeria where a large percentage of the population lives below the poverty line. One of the obstacles to understanding Islamism is that attention in the media is primarily devoted to extremists and Islamic fundamentalists. There is a distinction to be made between political Islam and radical militant Islam. An article in *The Economist* in July 1996 analysed the diversity of Islam:

"It is sometimes supposed that Islamic politics are special, that normal rules do not apply. Part of the myth is that Islamism - the 'fundamentalism' of the popular imagination - is homogeneous. In fact, as Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori argue in their new book 'Muslim Politics' (Princeton), it has numerous currents: violent and non-violent, revolutionary, reactionary and middle-of-the-road. The typical Islamist movement is a loose, and often not very coherent, coalition of different trends. The radical trends make news. But their victory is far from inevitable."<sup>4</sup>

Since the end of the cold war the threat of Islamic fundamentalism undermining the established world order has steadily climbed up the international security agenda. Militant Islam has become a potent vehicle for expressing dissent and demanding fundamental political, economic and social change across North Africa and the Middle East. In North Africa, Algeria and Egypt are most challenged by militant Islamic groups, which represent a serious threat to the continuance of their state structures. The Islamist threat in Algeria is of wider concern, given the implications for regional security and the potentially destabilising effect on the neighbouring governments of Morocco and Tunisia, as well as of particular concern for Europe, since it is believed that an Islamist victory could trigger a flood of refugees seeking asylum in France and other parts of western Europe. Increasingly in parts of the Middle East and North Africa there has been a rise in militant Islam and, especially in connection with Algeria, it is the militant Islamists who are accused of orchestrating the wave of terror that that country has experienced for the past five years.

The *RUSI International Security Review 1994* gives the following explanation for the rise of an Islamist threat in Algeria:

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition, Volume VIII.*

<sup>4</sup> 'Living with Islam/Islam between violence and politics', *The Economist*, 27 July 1996.



"In both Egypt and Algeria the rise of militant Islam is symptomatic of a crisis of identity and loss of direction echoed across the Arab world. The cause of Arab nationalism, used by governments to galvanise popular support in the post-colonial age has failed to achieve its goals. Socialist economic programmes, followed by faltering attempts at liberalisation, have not succeeded in stemming the tide of growing unemployment and impoverishment in the face of rapid population growth."<sup>5</sup>

The struggle between the Algerian military and the Islamists can be said to date from the suspension of the electoral process in January 1992. There had been a build up to strife and increasing support for the Islamists for several years before this, due to popular disenchantment with the government as a result of poverty, unemployment and a housing shortage. The root of the problem lay in the balance of payments deficit in 1985-86. In the 1970s and early 1980s state spending had been sustained by rising oil revenues, but when energy prices dropped, the FLN failed to react adequately and the costs of servicing the national debt consumed most of the country's foreign currency earnings, resulting in a drop in living standards. A government decision to raise taxes and cut subsidies on staple commodities led to food riots in 1988, as well as calls for more open government, less corruption and less economic inequality. The present violence seems, therefore, to have its roots in a deep-seated sense of economic and social injustice, as much as in religious convictions.

It was in the wake of this pressure for more legitimacy that the then President Chadli paved the way for the first multi-party general elections in Algeria by introducing a new constitution in February 1989, signifying the end of the one-party socialist state and promulgating a new law in July 1989 permitting the formation of political parties. As a result, a total of 47 political parties had been registered by mid-1991, including the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). The FIS was a coalition of disparate factions, each with its own agenda. Apart from formal categories of groupings within the FIS<sup>6</sup>, the movement was cross-cut by divisions between moderates and extremists and it was partly in order to rally all these disparate factions that the FIS leadership felt impelled to play the explicitly Islamic card in the parliamentary elections.

The FIS was formed early in 1981 not as a political party, but as a religious organisation and was permitted by the government to function as such. President Chadli felt that the existence of such an organisation would serve as an outlet for the expression of general religious sentiments and, to a certain extent, he viewed the FIS as a prop of his own regime in maintaining civil order and stability in accordance with well-established Islamic principles.<sup>7</sup> After the ban on political parties was lifted, the FIS formally registered as a party and subsequently began criticizing the FLN regime for its lack of 'religiosity' and moral fibre and for its incompetence and corruption.

---

<sup>5</sup> *RUSI International Security Review 1994*, p.278.

<sup>6</sup> Such as the *Salafiyists*, *Djeza'ara-ists* and *Afghanistes*.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the FIS did act as a calming influence during the riots of 1988.

## IV Suspension of the electoral process

The first multi-party general election was scheduled to take place on 27 June 1991, shortly after the holding of local elections, at which the FIS received 55% of the total votes. This result was not perceived as the victory of one political party over another. It was interpreted more in the light of a protest vote against an administration which was viewed as inefficient and corrupt. A large part of the FIS's support was also attributed to the large social support network it had established throughout the country. Due to anti-government demonstrations and a general strike called by the FIS in May 1991, the general elections were postponed until December 1991. This, together with perceived irregularities in the local elections, marked the beginning of a serious rift in FLN/FIS relations. The FIS believed that in order to avert the possibility of an FIS victory in the parliamentary elections, the FLN government had engineered certain amendments to the electoral law designed to disadvantage the FIS, relating to the use of proxy voting and the use of mosques at election times.<sup>8</sup> In July 1991, army units arrested about 700 Islamists, including FIS President, Abbasi Madani, and his vice-president, Ali Belhadj, on charges of armed conspiracy against the state. They were later sentenced by a military court to 12 years' imprisonment, which triggered widespread criticism of the government for reinforcing its emergency powers to repress any person or organisation whose activities were deemed to represent a threat to stability.

The FIS did very well in the first round of the ensuing parliamentary elections, which took place on 26 December 1991, gaining 47% of the vote, as opposed to the 24% gained by the FLN. Suspicious of President Chadli's move to accommodate the Islamists and fearing the establishment of an Islamic republic similar to that of Iran, the army forced President Chadli to dissolve the National People's Assembly by presidential decree in order to prevent an FIS victory in the second round. President Chadli was forced to resign by the army on 11 January 1992 and was replaced by a Higher Council of State (HCS) led by Ali Kafi. The HCS was appointed to act as a collegiate presidency until the expiry of Chadli's term of office in December 1993 at the latest. A state of emergency was proclaimed on 9 February 1992, which is still in place. In March 1992 the FIS was officially dissolved by the HCS and the leadership either went underground or into exile. It was the imprisonment of the leadership, along with the opening of prison camps and the campaign of repression that followed that provided armed radicals within the Islamist movement with the justification to launch a head-on confrontation against the authorities.

In April 1992 the Chairman of the Higher Council of State, Muhammed Boudiaf, announced the creation of a National Human Rights' Monitoring Centre and a 6-member National Consultative Council (NCC) which was to meet each month in the building of the suspended Assembly, although it enjoyed no legislative powers. In June 1992, Boudiaf proposed the

---

<sup>8</sup> *Contemporary Review*, 1 March 1993.

establishment of a National Patriotic Rally to prepare for genuine multi-party democracy and promised a constitutional review, the dissolution of the FLN and a presidential election. He also ordered the release of 2,000 FIS detainees, despite the fact that the security forces continued to be the target of frequent attack. On 29 June Boudiaf was assassinated, an act in which the FIS denied any participation.

The outbursts of violence following the suspension of the electoral process were initially patchy and limited, but they continued to grow and over time led to the emergence of resistance movements. There followed protest demonstrations in Algiers and other cities, appeals for multi-party dialogue to end the civil strife, which were not heeded, and the beginning of bombings in Algiers. This set a pattern of violence for the following years which saw increasing efforts on the part of the government to stamp out the armed Islamist groups. As a result, government forces have been accused by international human rights groups of committing as many atrocities as the militant Islamic groups.

## V Polarization of the conflict

In January 1994 the HCS urgently called a national conference to try to find a way out of Algeria's constitutional impasse and find a successor system.<sup>9</sup> Political parties refused to participate in the national conference, however, and, as a result, the army took centre stage, nominating former defence minister Liamine Zeroual as President. Zeroual's reputation was as a hardline, but intelligent and flexible political operator.<sup>10</sup> He assumed the presidency on 31 January 1994.

By this time two camps had emerged within each side of the conflict: those hostile to any kind of negotiations and those who sought a negotiated settlement. This dichotomy within each group led to a stalemate. The atrocities and the economic sabotage committed by various Islamist armed groups, especially the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA - Islamic Armed Group),<sup>11</sup> gave the upper hand in the government to supporters of the policy of 'le tout sécuritaire'.<sup>12</sup> This policy of 'eradicating' the Islamists has been condemned not only by the seven opposition parties, but also by those inside the regime who felt that the banning of the FIS should have been offset by greater political freedom. They advocate an opening up of the political system in which a reformed, moderate FIS would be allowed to participate. The opposition, especially Hocine Ait Ahmed, leader of the Front of Socialist Forces (FFS), feels that integrating the Islamists into the political arena would force them to 'play the game' and that they would be totally discredited if they reneged on their commitments.<sup>13</sup> Integration was and still is, therefore, seen in some quarters as the best way of containing the advance of the Islamists by highlighting their political limitations.

Faced with an ever worsening security situation, the Algerian authorities launched an all-out offensive to stamp out the Islamic insurgency at the end of March 1994. On 23 March the interior minister, Salem Saadi, reported that the government had decided to apply a radical solution to "strangle the evil which was gnawing away at Algerian society."<sup>14</sup> The new strategy entailed mobilising additional human and material resources, including the possibility of calling up army reservists. This decision came at a time when growing areas of the country were in effect under the control of the militants and followed an escalation in the attacks by Islamic militants on intellectuals, journalists and other professionals. There were also fears that support for the insurgency was likely to be fuelled by price rises announced on 24 March 1994. These rises were, in fact, in accordance with the IMF's recommendations for restructuring the Algerian economy, but analysts feared that in the short-term they would only aggravate the social tensions which gave rise to the crisis in the first place.

---

<sup>9</sup> The mandate of the HCS had expired on 31 December 1993.

<sup>10</sup> *Jane's Intelligence Review Yearbook 1994/95*.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the groups involved in the violence and the type of atrocities committed see Chapter VI.

<sup>12</sup> *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 7 February 1996.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Middle East International*, 2 April 1994.

The Algerian prime minister, Redha Malik, and his government resigned on 11 April 1994 after only seven months in office. Although no official reason was given, it followed persistent rumours of a rift between Malik and President Zeroual over policy towards the FIS.<sup>15</sup> Former minister for public works, Mokdad Sifi, became the new prime minister and analysts interpreted his appointment as signalling a clear division of powers, with the prime minister managing economic and social affairs, leaving the president free to pursue political initiatives to end the violence. As such, the main task of the Sifi government was to oversee tough austerity measures introduced as part of an agreement with the IMF to overhaul the state-controlled economy. The FIS spokesman in exile, Rabah Kebir, described the change in prime minister as "a positive act in the context of the search for a negotiated settlement."<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Malik was known to be a staunch opponent of dialogue with the fundamentalists.

<sup>16</sup> *Middle East International*, 29 April 1994.

## VI Escalating violence and the groups involved

The FIS is not the only group involved in the Islamic insurgency. The past few years have seen the rise of several militant Islamic groups, such as the Movement for an Islamic State and the Islamic Army of Salvation (AIS), which is the armed wing of the FIS, although how much the FIS hierarchy is in control of the AIS is open to doubt.<sup>17</sup> Another grouping is the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), led by Antar Zouabri, which has tried to act as an umbrella group, bringing together the more radical Islamist elements and today is the most militant grouping. The GIA originally received assistance from Iran, but this is thought to have stopped. The GIA is now believed to receive weapons and training through a network of Islamic militant groups operating from the Indian subcontinent, through Egypt and Sudan and across North Africa.<sup>18</sup> Political analysts are puzzled about the relationship between the GIA and the FIS. Some believe that the two groups represent two faces of the same coin, while others see them as rivals. The FIS and GIA certainly pursue different tactics: the FIS is opposed to attacks against those not involved with the government or in security operations, such as civilians or foreigners. It has concentrated its attacks against the security forces and government officials, in an attempt to assert pressure on the authorities to negotiate. The AIS tends to operate in the east and west of the country, away from Algiers and the central region where the GIA predominates. The FIS has denounced the GIA, although government rhetoric makes no distinction between the two.

The GIA, on the other hand, has a more radical agenda. It is opposed to anything less than the overthrow of the government through a campaign of terror. The GIA appears to be deeply divided, however, and it is often not clear which splinter group of the GIA is responsible for which action. It is also not clear if all the splinter groups are working to the same agenda.<sup>19</sup>

It is reportedly the GIA which is mainly responsible for the killing of foreign nationals, intellectuals and professionals, vowing to target people who 'help' the Algerian government. In what is coming to be known as 'intellectocide', academics are now viewed by the extremists as the most public symbol of what they wish to destroy, since they represent the secular and foreign influences which the Islamists blame for Algeria's moral decay.<sup>20</sup> Over a hundred foreigners have been killed in Algeria since September 1993, embassies have closed and many foreign companies have withdrawn personnel. As a result of the targeting of the press, there has been scant media coverage of the Algerian conflict. The GIA has warned the press corps that 'those who criticise us with their pen will die by the sword' and, indeed, many journalists have been assassinated since May 1993.

---

<sup>17</sup> *Jane's Intelligence Review Yearbook 1994/95.*

<sup>18</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 16 October 1996.

<sup>19</sup> *The World Today*, April 1997.

<sup>20</sup> *Jane's Intelligence Review*, May 1994.

Four members of the GIA were responsible for the hijacking of an Air France airbus on 23 December 1994. It was also the GIA which was responsible for the murder of four foreign priests in Algeria the day after the successful storming of the hijacked aircraft at Marseilles airport on 26 December. The GIA later issued a statement maintaining that this revenge attack was part of the "annihilation and physical liquidation of Christian crusaders".<sup>21</sup>

In September 1994, President Zeroual transferred to house arrest the FIS leaders Abbasi Madani and Ali Belhadj. This was interpreted by some analysts as the first step towards the return of the FIS into mainstream Algerian politics and a signal of the acceptance by the government that the FIS has a role to play in restoring stability in Algeria. The release of Madani and Belhadj had little immediate impact on the level of violence, however. In a report published on 25 October 1994 on human rights in Algeria, Amnesty International noted "a growing spiral of violence (in which) the security forces and armed Islamist groups act in total disregard of international and humanitarian law."<sup>22</sup> Some commentators believe that the emergence of the GIA as a significant force in Algeria has undermined prospects of a political compromise between the FIS and the government. On the one hand, the FIS is hesitant about making any moves towards a negotiated settlement in case it loses support to the GIA and, on the other hand, those within the government who are opposed to dialogue cite the GIA as evidence that there can be no compromise with the fundamentalists.

---

<sup>21</sup> *The Guardian*, 29 December 1994.

<sup>22</sup> *Reuters*, 25 October 1994.

## VII Attempts at dialogue and the Sant'Egidio Platform for peace

At the end of 1993 there was a secret meeting between President Zeroual, who was then defence minister, and FIS leaders, details of which were only reported in March 1994. The aim of the meeting was to reach a compromise and end the violence. Zeroual's attempts suffered a setback, however, when the FIS accused the government of failing to keep various promises. The FIS also insisted that as a first step towards a political solution, the authorities had to lift the ban on the party and end torture and indiscriminate killings by the security forces. As a potential sign that he was serious about reaching a political compromise with the FIS, President Zeroual sacked his hard-line interior minister in April 1994. Another attempt at establishing dialogue with the FIS was made by Zeroual in the summer of 1994. This collapsed in October, however, following a lack of will to succeed on either side. This led to a violent stalemate. According to negotiations theorists, a "hurting stalemate" is often a precondition for serious negotiations.<sup>23</sup>

By early 1995 Algeria had reached the point where it appeared that political dialogue offered the only way of avoiding a full-scale civil war. A promising step in the direction of compromise took place in January 1995 with the meeting of the leaders of Algerian opposition political parties brokered by the Catholic peace group Sant'Egidio<sup>24</sup> in Rome. This included the outlawed FIS and was intended to work out a way of re-opening political dialogue. The 'platform' was signed on 13 January 1995 by the FIS and a large part of the opposition, including the Front of Socialist Forces (FFS) and the FLN. It set out a series of preconditions for starting peace negotiations, including the release of all FIS and political prisoners and a pledge from the army to stay out of politics. Other conditions included an end to torture and censorship, full political freedom and the legalisation of the FIS. The signatories announced their rejection of violence and advocated a 'national contract'<sup>25</sup> with the Algerian authorities as the only way to reach a peaceful and democratic solution to the crisis. The 'national contract', designed as a basis for negotiation with the government, was described as a remarkably farsighted document.<sup>26</sup> The text of the document envisaged a truce, after which a transitional 'national conference' would negotiate a broad-based transitional administration that would pave the way for democratic, multi-party elections. Several commentators hailed the document as a good contribution to bridging the enmity between religious and lay parties and, for the first time, for having pushed the FIS into an unequivocal declaration of democratic values. Ahmed Ben Bella, one of the founders of the FLN and Algeria's first president after independence, wrote that the document that resulted

---

<sup>23</sup> *Foreign Policy*, 1 June 1995.

<sup>24</sup> Who were also instrumental in helping to establish a peace deal between Mozambique's government and the Renamo rebels in 1992.

<sup>25</sup> Consisting of negotiations and power-sharing before the holding of new elections.

<sup>26</sup> *Foreign Policy*, 1 June 1995.



from the Rome meeting showed real maturity on the part of the political opposition and provided an opening for a solution of similar problems in the Arab and Islamic world.<sup>27</sup>

The Algerian authorities, who did not send a representation to the talks, rejected the platform and denounced the meeting as outside interference in Algeria's internal affairs. In an interview with Robert Fisk, Algerian Interior Minister Abderahman Meziane-Cherif, made his disdain for foreign interference clear:

"No one in the world can pressure Algeria. In the worst months of the (independence) war, we never accepted advice from others. We sometimes reacted badly to friends who tried to interfere, but Algeria knows what it is doing. We are fighting fundamentalism that will otherwise invade other European countries. We are doing the job for other Arab and European countries."<sup>28</sup>

The rejection of the platform for peace was met with renewed violence. On 31 January 1995, the anniversary of Zeroual being called on to assume the Presidency, a car bomb in Algiers killed 42 people and reportedly injured 348 others.<sup>29</sup> This was the first time that a suicide bombing, a standard weapon of Islamic militants in Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian entities, had been used in the Algerian conflict. Some commentators have suggested that this incident, which was the single worst incident since the conflict began, may signal a new tactic on the part of the Islamists. On 22 February, following a mutiny in Sakardji prison, the security authorities opened fire and killed between 96 Islamists (the official figure given) and 230 (the figure issued by the Islamists). This was interpreted by the Islamists as both revenge for the suicide bombing and a political act, intended to destroy the chances of dialogue opened up in Rome. The government's action appears indicative of an increased drive to 'eradicate' the Islamists, hence the name of 'éradicateurs' coined for the organised groups within the army, police and gendarmerie to counter the terrorist threat.

---

<sup>27</sup> *The World Today*, 1 November 1995.

<sup>28</sup> *Independent on Sunday*, 12 March 1995.

<sup>29</sup> *Associated Press*, 31 January 1995.

## VIII Presidential election

President Zeroual announced in August 1995 that the presidential election would take place on 16 November 1995. Forty people presented themselves as candidates, but by October only four had received the requisite number of signatures to stand. Alongside Zeroual, these were Mahfoud Nahnah, leader of the moderate Islamist party MSI (known as Hamas - not connected with the Palestinian Hamas); Said Sadi, leader of the secular Rally for Democracy and Culture (RCD); and Nourredine Boukrouh, leader of the Party for the Algerian Renewal (PRA). President Liamine Zeroual, who is described as a well respected nationalist and conciliator,<sup>30</sup> won the election with 62% on an exceptionally high turnout (75%) given the threats issued by the GIA to kill anyone going to the polls. The election, which was the first pluralist presidential election in Algeria's history as an independent state, took place in relative calm due to a massive security blanket.<sup>31</sup> Some doubts were expressed about the figures, but foreign observers accepted that the result reflected the majority will of the voters. Several commentators believed the result highly plausible in a region where the benefits of incumbency usually result in a far higher percentage of the vote. David Hirst of *The Guardian* (22 December 1995) wrote:

"... the Algerian elections were arbitrary, idiosyncratic and flawed. But, in their peculiar circumstances, they had real meaning. Thanks in part to the guarantees provided by foreign observers, the people were persuaded that they could be an authentic expression of their will."

Commentators see the choice of a military man as president as not accidental, since Algerian politics has always favoured a strong leader who can bring order. This does not suggest that Algerians necessarily voted for Zeroual as such. A more likely explanation is that they voted against Islamic extremism and for the re-establishment of peace and security in the country.<sup>32</sup>

The FIS was not allowed to contest the election and urged voters to boycott it. Sheikh Mahfoud Nahnah, the leader of Hamas, came second with 26% of the vote. The FIS is said to have urged its supporters to vote for Hamas. The 26% vote for Nahnah indicates the attachment to some of the principles espoused by the FIS, such as social justice, morality in political affairs and Islamic values, without the violence associated with the armed Islamic groups.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 7 February 1996.

<sup>31</sup> Zeroual deployed tens of thousands of troops to ensure security.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

Commentators have said that the opposition parties which did not take part made a major mistake and may have lost legitimacy in the eyes of the public. The election also led to the downfall of the FLN leader Abdel-hamid Mehri and to serious dissension within the FIS leadership. In the aftermath of the election the exiled FIS leadership split between those who were prepared to accept that President Zeroual's rule had been legitimised by the election outcome, and those who regarded any such affirmation as treason. Both exiled factions claim the support of FIS leaders imprisoned in Algeria. The more moderate faction is represented by Rabeih Kebir based in Bonn, the more radical by Anouar Haddam in Washington. The armed forces emerged from the elections intact despite fears that they were on the brink of splitting apart, which may have precipitated the total collapse of the country.

In December 1995, Ahmed Ouyahia, a career diplomat, replaced Mokdad Sifi as Prime Minister. In January 1996 a new government was formed which included two representatives of Hamas, one of the Algerian Renewal Party and a former member of the FIS. *Le Monde* (8 January 1996) described this as "the first pluralist cabinet in the history of independent Algeria" and it was seen as a cautious gesture of reconciliation. Despite these signs of a possible breakthrough in the conflict, the violence resumed in February 1996 with bombings and kidnappings.

President Zeroual claimed that the result represented a genuine expression of the people's desire to move towards a political settlement through dialogue between the military and the fundamentalists. The presidential election was seen as an opportunity to move towards ending the crisis and indeed Zeroual had promised to enter talks with all the members of the opposition, including the FIS. Instead of reviving the political liberalization that had existed between 1989 and 1992 and extending this to include a process of democratization, however, which was seen as the only realistic path to ending the crisis by eliminating the grounds for the present extremism, Zeroual refused to negotiate on the basis of the Sant'Egidio platform and enhanced the policy of 'eradicating' the Islamists. Zeroual also seemed to be undecided about how far it was necessary or desirable to continue with overtures to the moderate opposition. However, at the end of March 1996 he invited representatives of various opposition parties to begin a dialogue with the government about the arrangements for new parliamentary elections and an eventual return to parliamentary government. This initiative was welcomed by the USA, with Assistant Secretary of State Pelletreau endorsing the move.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 10 April 1996.

## IX French policy in Algeria

There are divisions in the international community over how to approach the Algerian crisis, with France and the United States having very different views on how to approach the situation. France is seen as supporting the government, believing that the alternative is further political unrest, the spread of Islamic fundamentalism across North Africa and a flood of refugees to Europe. The United States, on the other hand, is pressing the Algerian government into negotiating with opponents, including moderate Islamists.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, US officials have met exiled FIS leaders in Washington and Germany and have given their public backing to secular opposition leaders who favour dialogue, on the basis that broad political participation will contribute to long-term stability.<sup>35</sup>

In general, however, the need to steer clear of alienating Algiers complicates outside attempts to play a role in ending the conflict. European countries have therefore found it convenient to leave the Algerian conflict to France as the former colonial power. France realises that it is in both the best and worst position to help restore peace in Algeria, however, with the psychological and historical dimension of the Franco-Algerian relationship still weighing heavily. France was originally one of the parties which did not believe in compromise with the Islamists, since it believed that there was no such thing as moderate political Islam. Former Interior Minister, Charles Pasqua, who was the main advocate of this belief, did later modify this line and stopped publicly insisting that there was no such thing as a "moderate Islamist."<sup>36</sup>

French policy in Algeria has been summed up as follows:

"M. Pasqua says simply that there is no such thing as a moderate fundamentalist, so all support must be given to preventing the arrival in power of Islamic regimes. The effect of this has been to encourage intransigence in the Zeroual Government in Algeria, as its forces resort to ever more brutal methods. France has been demonised in the eyes of the insurgents, and French interests have become a prime target....

If you talk to French ministers about Algeria, they adopt an air of fatality, using words like tragedy and impotence. In gloomier moments, some sketch dark visions of a fundamentalist tide, born in Iran and Afghanistan, sweeping across the Maghreb through Tunisia and Algeria to Morocco....

---

<sup>34</sup> The United States has reportedly drawn conclusions from its long estrangement with Iran and the violent anti-Western feelings displayed by Arab public opinion following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (*Middle East International*, 5 August 1994).

<sup>35</sup> *Middle East International*, 5 August 1994.

<sup>36</sup> *Foreign Policy*, 1 June 1995.

This emotional background chimes with France's sense these days of being under cultural siege, and it has clearly coloured what critics see as the mishandling by successive governments in Paris of relations with Algeria since the 1992 elections were abandoned. Relations with the Algerian Government had never been easy. However, fear of the emergence of a totalitarian mullahs' regime has led Paris to support what amounts to a bankrupt ruling power incapable of shedding the corruption and mismanagement which have squandered the wealth of what was once France's most prosperous colony. M Balladur insists, as he did again yesterday, that France wants to see dialogue between the Government and the FIS leaders, and wants democracy in Algeria. This has been the line of Alain Juppe, the Foreign Minister, too, but the stronger message from Paris has come with economic and military aid, support through the International Monetary Fund and above all with the stance of M. Pasqua."<sup>37</sup>

Fearful of the advent of a fundamentalist regime, France has favoured economic support for the Zeroual administration, which translated into over US \$1 billion in economic aid in 1994.<sup>38</sup> Viewing the Islamic challenge in North Africa as the most serious external threat to western Europe following the Cold War, France has also encouraged its EU partners to channel aid to Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. There have also been various reports of France supplying military support to Algeria, although in 1995 French Foreign Ministry officials insisted that France was no longer supplying military equipment such as helicopters and night vision instruments to the Algerian military.<sup>39</sup>

On 3 February 1995, President Mitterrand called for an EU-sponsored peace initiative on Algeria, which caused some consternation in the French cabinet. In particular Alain Juppé and interior minister, Charles Pasqua, believed that France was in the worst possible position to take such an initiative and advocated a strong policy of encouraging a political dialogue<sup>40</sup> and non-interference. According to an article in the French newspaper *Libération*, which was reproduced in *The Guardian* on 9 February 1995, the Algerian crisis was the source of the first serious malfunction of cohabitation in French foreign policy.<sup>41</sup>

France used its presidency of the European Union in the first six months of 1995 to put security and stability in the Mediterranean region and the Maghreb onto the EU agenda.<sup>42</sup> This resulted in a refocusing of EU resources towards this area in the form of the Euro-Mediterranean agreements following the Barcelona conference in November 1995. By this time the European Union had decided to increase economic assistance to the area to 5.5 billion ECU over the following five years.

---

<sup>37</sup> *Times*, 28 December 1994.

<sup>38</sup> *Jane's Intelligence Review Yearbook 1994/95*.

<sup>39</sup> *Foreign Policy*, 1 June 1995.

<sup>40</sup> France urged the Algerian authorities to accept the opposition's platform for peace.

<sup>41</sup> The cohabitation of a left-of-centre French President (Mitterrand) with a right-of-centre French government.

<sup>42</sup> The European Council meeting in Corfu in June 1994 had already agreed to increase the EU's efforts towards the peace, stability, security and socio-economic development of the Mediterranean region.

## Research Paper 97/57

Franco-Algerian relations have become chilly under President Chirac, following a series of terrorist attacks on the French mainland. A series of bombings throughout 1996 left eight people dead and dozens injured. The most recent of these was the bombing of a train in Port-Royal station in Paris on 3 December 1996, which killed four people. This was almost certainly perpetrated by Algerian Islamic extremists, probably the GIA, according to French authorities.<sup>43</sup> Militant Islamic groups have threatened more terrorist attacks unless Paris withdraws its support for the Algerian government.

Recently, with President Chirac's blessing, the French foreign ministry has established good relations with the leader of the moderate Islamist party known as Hamas. Nahnah was once seen by Zeroual as a potential ally, but is now increasingly looking like a rival in the run-up to legislative elections in June 1997.

---

<sup>43</sup> The GIA is thought to have an extensive logistics network among North African Arab immigrants in France, although terrorism experts think that the bombers are sent in from abroad to carry out their missions.

## X Referendum on the constitution

Algeria held a referendum on constitutional reform on 28 November 1996, which was seen in several quarters to provide the government's plans with 'a coating of democratic legitimacy'.<sup>44</sup> The draft amendments to the constitution increase the powers of the president and also ban political parties based on religion, ethnicity or language, although moderate Islamist parties will simply alter their names. The government's argument was that taking religion and language out of formal politics would lead to the development of a constructive and less divisive form of national politics. Opposition parties naturally denounced the changes as a ploy to consolidate the army's control of politics which remains hidden behind the strengthened presidency.<sup>45</sup> The main opposition parties urged Algerians to vote "no" or boycott the referendum, although it was predicted beforehand that state television propaganda urging a "yes" vote would lead to the adoption of the draft constitutional changes.

The amended constitution provides for a bicameral parliament with reduced powers. The lower chamber will be composed entirely of directly elected deputies. In order for an important bill that has been approved by the lower chamber to become law it has to be approved by a three-quarters majority of the second chamber, the Council of the Nation, a third of whose members are now appointed by the President.<sup>46</sup> This is effectively seen as providing President Zeroual with a blocking vote in parliament. Another article allows the president to legislate by decree when parliament is not sitting.

The powers of parliament are also reduced in the field of economics. The parliament is given only 75 days to ratify the budget. If this time limit is not respected, the president can ratify the budget by decree. The president will also have the main say in the nomination of the majority of state officials, from the governor of the Bank of Algeria to magistrates and military posts, which some commentators see as institutionalised dictatorship. According to the official results, 85.81% voted in favour of constitutional change with a record turnout of 79.80%.<sup>47</sup>

Although enhancing its democratic legitimacy through the referendum on the constitution, critics argue that the Algerian government has still done nothing to address the causes of the violence.

---

<sup>44</sup> John Simpson writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 December 1996.

<sup>45</sup> *The World Today*, April 1997.

<sup>46</sup> The remainder are indirectly elected by the members of local assemblies.

<sup>47</sup> *Le Monde*, 30 November 1996.

## XI Recent violence

Although prime minister Ouyahia said at the end of 1996 that all but the remnants of terrorism had been eliminated, the beginning of 1997 was the bloodiest Ramadan<sup>48</sup> since the suspension of the electoral process in 1992. Some commentators say that it was the bloodiest Ramadan since 1962 when Algeria's war of liberation against France was at its height. The start of Ramadan was marked by a bombing and a shooting offensive in Algiers and massacres in the countryside. Western intelligence believes that 300 people were killed during this period.<sup>49</sup> The Medea district south of Algiers has become the main killing ground, with particularly brutal massacres. Much of the violence, particularly in rural areas, began after the constitutional referendum in November 1996. This is interpreted as the GIA's attempt to keep its promise to cut the throats of those who defied it to vote in the referendum. The leader of the GIA, Antar Zouabri, vowed to make Ramadan the "month of a hundred bombs", saying that Algerians had to 'choose their camp'.<sup>50</sup> With an increasing number of self-defence militias, there has been a rise in the number of vendettas and scores to be settled, which have nothing to do with the government's fight against the Islamists. The Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) has also increased the number of military-style operations against security forces to differentiate its operations from attacks against civilians by the GIA.

The violence has prompted local people to form their own self-defence patrols. An anti-Islamist newspaper called this a new phenomenon and the beginning of a spontaneous intifada against the terror. This is not new, however: the regime itself encouraged the formation of popular militias, now numbering about 200,000. The self-defence patrols are a law unto themselves, thought to be committing crimes just as horrific as those by militant Islamists and are the main reason why the civil war is slipping out of the hands of the 'official' protagonists. What began as a political conflict is now therefore taking on a more local character, motivated by revenge and the defence of family honour. It appears uncontrollable and some observers say risks becoming 'cataclysmic'.<sup>51</sup> The seemingly uncontrollable nature of the conflict is compounded by the lack of reliable information about the nature of the violence and the motives of the perpetrators.

In late January 1997 the leader of Algeria's main trade union, Abdelhak Benhamouda, was killed in Algiers, reportedly by the Islamic Front of the Armed Jihad<sup>52</sup>, a local rival of the GIA, although others say that he was almost certainly killed by a faction within the regime. At the same time, Algeria's principal secular opposition leader, Hocine Ait Ahmad of the

---

<sup>48</sup> Ramadan is a lunar month of special religious significance in the Muslim calendar, this year falling on 10 January - 9 February.

<sup>49</sup> *Financial Times*, 11 February 1997.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *The Guardian*, 8 February 1997.

<sup>52</sup> The military wing of the mainstream Djazair tendency within the Islamist camp.



Socialist Forces' Front (FFS), accused France of indifference to the rising death toll and called on the United States to appoint a mediator. France replied that it is not in favour of Ahmad's proposal for launching US mediation efforts.<sup>53</sup> Neither is the Algerian government likely to be in favour of such a proposal.

---

<sup>53</sup> *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 27 January 1997.*

## XII Parliamentary elections 1997

The first round of legislative elections is to be held on 5 June 1997. Rhoula Khalaf wrote in the *Financial Times* on 13 February 1997, "The elections are a cornerstone of President Zeroual's policy of remoulding Algeria's political scene into a system which has the facade of a democracy but where the presidency, and the army behind it, retain control." On 21 February 1997 an ally of President Zeroual, Abdelkader Bensalah, announced the formation of a political party ahead of the legislative elections. Bensalah is speaker of the government-appointed National Transitional Council (CNT), the interim parliament, and stepped in to head the party after the murder of Abdelhak Benhamouda, who was meant to have led the party.

The new party, the National Democratic Rally, (NDR) will reportedly draw support from the UGTA trade union federation and organisations of women's, peasants' and independence war veterans' groups which support Zeroual. Bensalah said that the NDR would be the heir of Algeria's war of independence against French rule and appeal to citizens who have 'confronted terrorism with courage and heroism'.<sup>54</sup> He also said that the NDR would work to 'encourage freedom of expression, anchor the principle of social justice, human rights and national solidarity, while working in favour of Algeria's development and progress in a climate of security, stability and concord'.<sup>55</sup>

The emergence of a "presidential" party of this nature is seen as a clear sign of the disintegration of the FLN, which is already split between pro-government leadership and the more respected anti-government reformist wing. The new party is also designed as a counterweight to Hamas which the government believes will attract many former FIS supporters.<sup>56</sup> Hamas, which is considered a moderate Islamist party, has maintained an often cozy relationship with the government and is expected to emerge as a leading contender in the elections. The 'eradicators' are alarmed at Zeroual seeking to establish his own loyalist party, having formerly insisted that he would remain above the political fray.

In order to avoid a repeat of the first round of legislative elections in 1991 which saw the FIS poised to control the national assembly under the majority voting system, in mid-February the CNT backed a voting system based on proportional representation. The CNT also passed a law imposing restrictions on forming political parties. The law gives parties a year to comply and requires them to hold new founding congresses with between 400 and 500 delegates elected by 2,500 supporters from 25 of Algeria's 48 provinces. Since the legislative elections are so near, the parties are likely to be allowed to participate before complying with

---

<sup>54</sup> *Agence France Presse International*, 21 February 1997.

<sup>55</sup> *Reuters*, 21 February 1997.

<sup>56</sup> The FIS is excluded from the upcoming elections.

the new law. They will, however, have to conform to the new law banning the use of religion in politics. This will particularly affect Hamas and Nahda, the other legal Islamist party, which have been given two months to conform to the new law. They will have to remove any mention of religion from their titles and political programmes.

The new system will ensure that no single party will dominate the new parliament, although it is likely that the largest blocs of seats will go to the new NDR and Hamas.

## XIII Conclusions

The government has now ruled out the possibility of any negotiations with the FIS and continues to insist on eradicating armed Islamic groups through the use of force. The limits of this strategy were made apparent during Ramadan, as massacres and bomb explosions became daily occurrences. Some politicians, such as the leader of the Socialist Forces Front, have criticised the government for blocking peaceful channels to a political settlement and advocate the involvement of the FIS in the political process. External commentators and domestic opposition parties agree that Algeria's troubles will only have a chance of ending when genuine elections are held with the participation of the FIS. It has been suggested in several quarters that the FIS's imprisoned leaders, particularly deputy leader Ali Belhadj, would be able to influence many of the youths who have taken up arms against the state.<sup>57</sup> This is a moot point, however: after five years in exile, it is difficult to gauge whether the FIS remains popular or whether its leaders retain any authority over the more extreme elements of the Islamist movement.<sup>58</sup>

As far back as April 1994, US Presidential National Security Adviser Anthony Lake said:

"Islam is not the issue...our foe is oppression and extremism, whether in religious or secular guise. We also reject the notion that a renewed emphasis on traditional values in the Islamic world must inevitably conflict with the West or with democratic principles."<sup>59</sup>

It does, therefore, seem that the key to a solution may lie in the government's approach to the Islamists. Most observers find it hard to imagine a way out unless the government allows genuine outlets for Islamist opinion. President Zeroual already appears to have adopted a strategy of maintaining communication with moderate Islamist parties whilst seeking to eliminate the extreme radical groups. Some commentators draw on the parallel of Turkey as a lesson on accommodating Islamist parties:

"The country he [President Zeroual] might look to for a lesson in dealing with fundamentalism is Turkey. There too, the top men in the military took alarm at the rise of fundamentalism, but they allowed Islamic parties to stand for election and did nothing to discourage one of them from taking power. This was shrewdly calculated. The Welfare Party has been so ineffectual and corrupt in government that all its glamour has worn off. The Islamic parties are now thought of in Turkey as being just as much part of the useless political culture as any of the secular groupings."<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> *The World Today*, April 1997.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Jane's Intelligence Review Yearbook 1994/95*.

<sup>60</sup> John Simpson in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 December 1996.

In this regard, Turkey is seen as a test case and is fuelling the cautious debate on the merits of accommodating political Islam in Algeria. As one commentator points out, "One answer might be that, though detente with Islam is hard and occasionally painful, the alternative could be much worse."<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> *Economist*, 27 July 1996.

## Sources and further reading

Jonathan G. Farley, "Algeria: democracy on hold", *Contemporary Review* 262, 1 March 1993

"Confronting militant Islam: Egypt & Algeria", *RUSI International Security Review* 1994

George Joffe, "Algeria - a sombre outlook", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, May 1994

Claire Spencer, "Algeria in crisis", *Survival*, 1 June 1994

*Middle East International*, 2 April 1994; 29 April 1994; 5 August 1994

James Wyllie, "Islamic Revivalism", *Jane's Intelligence Review Yearbook* 1994/95

"Worsening crisis in Algeria", *RUSI Newsbrief*, 1 January 1995

"Algeria since independence", *FCO Background Brief* 1995

George Joffe, "Algeria and the Maghreb - the future looks grim", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 1 May 1995

Mohand Salah Tah, "Algeria's democratisation process: a frustrated hope", *Third World Quarterly*, 1 June 1995

Andrew Pierre & William B. Quandt, "Algeria's war on itself", *Foreign Policy*, 1 June 1995

Ahmed Ben Bella, "A time for peace in Algeria", *The World Today*, 1 November 1995

William Lewis, "Algeria at 35: the politics of violence", *Washington Quarterly*, 1 January 1996

Yahia Zoubir, "Algeria: ballot box versus bullet", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 7 February 1996

"Presentation of the programme for the French Presidency of the WEU", Meeting of M. Hervé de Charette, Minister of Foreign Affairs, with the journalists accredited to the WEU, Paris, 22 January 1997

Gilbert Grandguillaume, "Arabisation et demagogie en Algerie", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 1997

Heba Saleh, "Algeria tries to escape the nightmare", *The World Today*, April 1997

**Intenational Affairs**

### **Recent Research Papers**

<b>97/51</b>	NATO Enlargement	08.05.97
<b>97/47</b>	The Commonwealth	29.04.97
<b>97/36</b>	The European Politics and European Monetary Union: Developments in Germany, France, Italy and Spain	19.03.97
<b>97/15</b>	European Defence Industrial and Armaments Co-operation	04.02.97
<b>97/19</b>	The New Russia - Five Years on	06.02.97
<b>96/104</b>	Hong Kong: The Final Stages	13.11.96
<b>96/96</b>	Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office Bill [Bill 1 of 1996/97]	30.10.97
<b>96/87</b>	Sustainable Development: Agenda 21 and [Earth Summit II]	16.08.97
<b>96/80</b>	The Dayton Agreement: Progress in Implementation	09.07.97
<b>96/74</b>	The Policy of Non-Cooperation with the EU	17.06.97