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Algeria at the Brink

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Within southern European capitals, quiet consultations have been initiated to prepare contingency plans should the government in Algiers collapse under Islamic radical pressures. The betting at present is that such a denouement is not imminent, nor do the governments of France, Italy, and Spain share the sentiment of Willy Claes, NATO's Secretary-General, who publicly suggested in March that radical Islam constitutes the biggest threat to the West, taking over where communism has left off. (He has since receded from this view.) Nevertheless, all three of these NATO member states are fearful that a takeover of Algeria by radical Islamic groups would have dire consequences:

- Widening conflict would produce massive refugee flows to France, Italy and Spain beyond the capacities of the three to absorb;
- Algeria, inevitably, would become a center for support of radical Islamic groups in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, attempting to destabilize these countries and, ultimately, adding to the already heavy economic and social burdens of southern Europe.

The French government has been divided in its Algerian policy, with the foreign ministry urging a negotiated settlement and the defense ministry supporting the Algerian military. However, confidence in the latter has eroded witness declining French economic aid and the newly installed Chirac presidency may tilt policy in favor of a negotiated settlement. The primary challenge, from the perspective of southern Europe's governments, is to develop an appropriate strategy to cope with a looming crisis laden with far-reaching consequences for their own political and economic orders. To date, NATO's northern European members have evinced little inclination to fashion approaches to deal with Algeria's political turbulence.

The preferred European outcome is a constructive dialogue among contending Algerian factions leading to a cease-fire and new elections to form a government of national reconciliation. In the interim,

Europeans condemn ongoing violence and political extremism. As a prudent measure, France, Italy and Spain have developed plans for emergency evacuation of their nationals including Algerians with dual citizenship in the case of France which would number tens of thousands. Reportedly, military preparations for evacuation are well advanced. The last two major WEU defense exercises TRAMONTANA in Spain this year and ARDENT in 1994 in Italy included practice evacuations. At present, the U.S. military is not directly involved in the plans, but has been kept apprised.

Alignment of Forces The struggle for Algeria's political and cultural future continues unabated, despite occasional attempts at dialogue by the Algerian government and the FIS leadership. For a brief period in 1994, the President, General Lamine Zeroual, appeared to signal a desire to enter into serious discussions with the two FIS leaders Madani and Belhadj who were transferred from prison to house arrest. The effort failed for several reasons: the senior military leadership was unwilling to make major concessions to jump-start talks; the Zeroual initiative was ill-received by the majority of Algerian political parties and labor organizations; the FIS leadership, for its part, suspected the Zeroual approach was a deception intended to allow the security services time to prepare for a major campaign to eradicate the Islamic opposition.

The failed government-FIS dialogue, and mounting casualties approaching 40,000 dead and wounded over three years of conflict, led eight Algerian groups to meet in Rome early in January. Their avowed purpose was to establish a National Contract, a formula for ending the crisis and establishing a democratic government. The key participants were (1) the FIS main line group; (2) FLN, which, through participation, was apparently breaking with its military partner of 30 years; and (3) the Front des Forces Socialistes (FFS), which claimed to represent Algeria's distinct Berber ethnic population of 3 million located in the Kabylie-Aures mountain regions. They pledged to:

- reject violence as a means of attaining or maintaining power;
- reject dictatorship;
- respect the changeover of power through universal suffrage;
- enforce the Army's non-intervention in political affairs;
- respect and promote human rights.

Of more than passing interest, the FIS, for the first time, declared its commitment to democratic processes. In exchange, it received support for legal status as a political party and release of its leadership from incarceration. The FFS won recognition of the Berber language as a national language on the same level as Arabic. The sponsor of the Rome dialogue, a Catholic religious order, indicated that its purposes in organizing the talks were humanitarian and designed to encourage an Algerian consensus leading to participatory democracy.

The official response by the Algerian government has been unreservedly negative. President Zeroual denounced the meetings as blatant intervention in the country's domestic affairs. Moreover, the government noted that the FIS militants have refused to eschew violence and have actually stepped up their attacks. The government, in response, has intensified its program of arming local militia groups for self-defense purposes.

In the period since the January talks in Rome, new fissures and realignments of political forces have emerged in Algeria. Within the military leadership, serious differences reportedly have emerged on how to resolve the continuing crisis, particularly on the advisability of holding a presidential election later this year. President Zeroual has reopened discussions with the (legal) parties and has been told by many of them that talks are meaningless if the (illegal) FIS is excluded. Some party chieftains, on the other

hand, demand disavowal of political violence by Madani and Belhadj as a precondition for inclusion in the government's dialogues. Still others believe that presidential elections should be postponed pending general suspension of hostilities and a national election to determine the extent of popular support for each of the parties.

Fissures have also emerged within the FIS. An exceedingly militant faction, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) now competes with the FIS Islamic Salvation Army for primacy of position in attacking government forces. The GIA has proved particularly brutal in killing teachers, journalists, government officials, and foreign nationals. Their excesses led Madani Merzak, the new commander of the FIS Islamic Salvation Army, to publish a letter part of which scolded the GIA for adventurism, anarchy and revenge. Thus far, the GIA, largely led by young wild men in their teens and early twenties, gives no evidence of heeding this criticism. The imprisoned FIS leadership, particularly Belhadj, appears unwilling at this juncture to publicly condemn the GIA on the grounds that Algeria's security forces are conducting their own terror campaign an allegation validated by many impartial observers.

Particularly disturbing has been the interruption of government services in some critical areas. With their forces stretched, the military has armed local militias which operate autonomously as vigilante groups. Many Algerians have lost faith that any single group can control or achieve victory in the existing conflict. They note the fragmentation of political and other groups which is currently underway. They also note that, since 1992, the military has appointed no fewer than three presidents and four prime ministers each with a clear-cut agenda for ending the conflict but none have been successfully implemented.

The Need for Constructive Engagement

The United States has a substantial interest in the Algerian struggle. In the energy sector, Atlantic Richfield is committed to a \$1.5 billion plus contract for developing oil fields. The potential financial rewards are significant. Algeria today exports 1.1 million barrels of oil a day together with more than 20 billion cubic meters of natural gas a year, primarily to Europe. Yet, both potentials remain largely unexplored. The United States and Western Europe both have major stakes in assured access to these resources, as does the Algerian government and its population at large. Islamic radicals have attacked Europeans engaged in export of oil and natural gas in an effort to strangle the modern sector of the economy and to bring the government down.

Algeria cannot and should not be weighed alone in terms of commercial advantage to the United States. If such criteria were to be applied, Algeria would not weigh heavily on the scales of U.S. foreign policy concerns. But the trauma being inflicted in Algeria is having a multiplier effect: widening waves of angst through North Africa, extending into southern Europe. An overhang of interconnected issues impacts adversely on the political equilibrium of the region. These issues extend well beyond the former French-controlled territories of North Africa. Involved are questions relating to a revival of traditional Islamic values within communities in the Greater Middle East and how an accommodation can be reached between groups and individuals concerned with pursuit of religious rather than secular goals or, more pointedly, whether humanitarian and democratic values can be accommodated in societies dedicated to perpetuation of traditional (sharia) precepts.

These dichotomies have generated a polarizing debate between those who perceive Islamic resurgence as a threat to Western civilization and others who believe such distinctions invalid. Those who contend that Islamic society is sufficiently flexible to accommodate divergent viewpoints and has potentially egalitarian traditions are challenged by those who perceive a rigidly totalitarian strain that opposes

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secular strains of thought. Within this context, Algeria is viewed as a major testing ground for these conflicted attitudes a testing ground with major policy implications for the United States.

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