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ALGERIA: AN UNCIVILIZED CIVIL WAR

CORE COURSE IV ESSAY

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COURSE IV

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*Silence is death
and if you say nothing
you die,
and if you speak
you die.
So speak and die.*

Tahar Djaout

These inimitable words have become more than a slogan for the warring factions in Algeria's quest for a legitimate government. Those who speak out for social justice often fall prey to the political violence that has accounted for over 28,000 deaths in the last two years. Moderates on both sides are seeking peace from the undeclared civil war that resulted when the military-backed regime canceled elections that Islamic fundamentalists were certain to win in 1992. (5, 16) Violence has recently escalated and fatalities on both sides are now running between 200 and 300 a week. (14, 234) This essay will address Algeria's present predicament and the issues that make solutions to Algeria's problems uniquely Algerian. It will specifically examine Algeria's history of socio-economic problems, regional implications, and U.S. policy.

Algeria, a large North African country, possessed the strongest industrial base of all the Maghreb nations in the 1980's and was well on its way to transformation from a socialist one-party authoritarian state to a multi-party democratic polity in the 1990's. How could Algeria deteriorate to such chaos so rapidly? The answer to this question is not simple and the solutions to Algeria's problems are even more complex.

The stakes of the war are high, since a victory by the Islamic fundamentalists would send political tremors throughout

the neighboring Maghreb states, as well as in Egypt and beyond. The chaos resulting from the conflict is further exacerbated as the war is waged amid a deepening economic crisis. The servicing of Algeria's foreign debt, which now amounts to 70 percent of the gross domestic product, absorbs the bulk of export revenues. Prices are up and investment and production are down, while unemployment has reached a quarter of the labor force--a highly explosive factor in a country in which 70 percent of the population is under 35. (14, 234) To begin an assessment of Algeria's present predicament we must first look to the roots of the conflict.

A CRISIS BORN OF REVOLUTION

Algeria won its independence from French colonial rule in 1962 as the result of a decade long resistance movement. Along with its independence, however, Algeria inherited a country ravaged by war and ruined even more by the mass departure of the European middle class, the million or so *pied noirs* who at the time made up about a tenth of the population. The resistance fighters never gained political control however, as power was immediately usurped by a division of the Algerian army stationed on the Tunisian frontier under the command of Colonel Hourari Boumediene. (14, 234)

Under Boumediene's rule, Algeria began to reap the benefits of new wealth from its oil and vast deposits of natural gas. The regime's economic leaders concentrated the bulk of the country's resources towards large industrialization projects. But many of the factories proved to be inefficient and either underproduced or

overproduced. To add to the problems, the government built factories on the country's richest agricultural land, weakening that sector of the economy. The government then collectivized the agricultural sector, but continued to concentrate most of its energy in the industrial base. As a result, agricultural production stagnated and imports of food rose dramatically to keep pace with the country's relentlessly increasing population, which had more than doubled in the quarter century since independence (in 1994 the population was over 27 million). (6, 224)

These inadequacies added to Algeria's already serious problems of housing shortages, over-urbanization, unreliable food production, a decrepit transportation system, constant water shortages, overcrowded schools, poor quality medical facilities and health services, and uncontrollable birthrate and consistently high rates of unemployment and underemployment. High oil and natural gas prices buoyed the economy and held these problems in check through the early 1980's

Algeria's hour of reckoning was soon at hand, however, as plummeting oil prices and the fall of the dollar combined with mismanagement of Algeria's highly centralized economy brought about the nation's most serious social and economic crisis. (14, 234) The regime relegated to redress these failures was that of Colonel Chadli Benjedid.

Colonel Benjedid was selected to preside over the country after Colonel Bounedienne died in 1978. Yet, from the very start of Colonel Benjedid's tenure, the Army ruled in conjunction with the National Liberation Front (FLN). This organization was the

people's early resistance movement now turned instrument of authoritarian rule. Key jobs at all levels of politics, administration, and the economy went to hand-picked members of the FLN. Nepotism grew, corruption spread and the gap between the wealthy and poor widened. The pillars holding Algeria's shaky economy and political system together were nearing destruction.

In an effort to reverse this trend, Colonel Benjedid initiated a series of domestic reforms designed to overcome structural problems in both the economy and polity. Specific economic reforms concentrated on four basic issues: shifting domestic investment away from heavy industry and toward agriculture, light industry and consumer goods; breaking up large state enterprises into smaller ones; privatizing state-owned farmlands; and encouraging private investment in industry. These reforms proved too weak, however, to overcome the significant power cells ensconced in the enormous state bureaucracy "who jealously protected their power, privileges, and patronage." (6, 227)

The government responded to Benjedid's economic reform failures with a new series of reforms designed to liberalize further the polity and economy. An Algerian human-rights league was legalized; the right of associations to form and go public was authorized; laws were passed to accelerate the privatization and exploitation of state-owned lands, and new legislation granted managerial autonomy to new enterprises operating on the laws of supply and demand (9, 3)

Social costs of these reforms proved high, however, as unemployment skyrocketed to 25 percent, the cities became overcrowded with acute housing shortages, and family purchasing power declined substantially. The attempts at reforming the state and society simultaneously proved beyond the regime's capacity in the face of Algeria's overwhelming socio-economic problems. The country was ready to explode.

The explosion came in October 1988, when the young men from Algeria's overcrowded slums, driven to despair by the absence of economic prospects, took to the streets in spontaneous violence. The army was called in to control the violence and finally quelled the riots after six days of bloody fighting that claimed over 250 lives with over 3,000 arrested. (4, 6)

Following the bloodshed, the regime did not alter its policy of liberalization, but moved rapidly toward the legalization of opposition parties. It also instituted constitutional reforms with major revisions in the organization, power, and position of the FLN in states and society. The regime put the military in check, as well, by prohibiting it from playing any direct role in party and politics. These measures were intended to be the start of Algeria's institutionalized democracy. (2, 8)

In less than nine months, the Algerian regime transformed from a single-party authoritarian state to a multi-party, pluralistic nation of laws. The regime officially recognized and registered twenty-eight political parties representing a wide range of political and religious ideologies. The political party known as the *Front Islamique du Salut* (Islamic Salvation

Front--FIS) rose to the forefront as the FLN's chief political contender. (13, 280)

ISLAMIC VICTORY

In the local elections of June 1990, the popularity of the new pluralistic nation was put to the test. The elections proved to be a trial of strength between the FLN and the emerging FIS. The result was a massive victory for the Islamists who ran as champions of the downtrodden, offering the people dignity, and, through religious covenants, salvation in the hereafter.

The FIS win clearly signaled a vote against those authorities closely associated with the violent suppression of the October 1988 riots. The FIS won 54 percent of the total votes and 850 town halls throughout the country. The government's response to the victory was calculated but suicidal.

In preparation for a parliamentary election in 1989, President Benjedid introduced an electoral system modeled on France's single-member constituency parliament. The system called for an absolute electoral majority in the first round and a simple majority in the second round to achieve victory. The government felt certain that the introduction of this system would ensure it electoral victory, since the system amplified national trends and favored the strongest party. The inevitable occurred in the first round of local elections, however, as the Islamic Front won 53 percent of the total vote and 55 percent of all state municipalities. (13, 231)

The FLN government, in a state of political shock, started working on a new strategy for the upcoming national parliamentary

elections. The government encouraged the creation of more political parties in an attempt to dilute an anticipated large FIS vote, and enacted new laws restructuring voting districts in a manner that favored the FLN party. Institution of these laws set off a wave of public furor and an attempted general strike. The government answered the intended strike by postponing the elections until December 1991, police crackdowns, and arresting the FIS leadership. (10, 6)

With over 50 political parties officially recognized, the FLN was confident of winning the election. The election results surprised everyone, as the FIS took 189 of 206 seats, with runoff elections scheduled to determine the remaining Parliament seats. (12, 139) This overwhelming victory assured the FIS the simple majority it needed in the second round.

The FLN was now faced with a momentous decision. "Should it hand the benefits of democracy over to its enemy-a fundamentalist party-which makes no secret of the fact that once it has imposed an Islamic state there will be no question of returning to a secular society? Should it ignore the will of the people when it goes against the government and accept it only when it suits the government?" (13, 234) In any case, the government did not take long to ponder the issues.

The Army and secret police led a state-wide crackdown, banned all political parties based on religion, and removed Chaldi Benjedid from the Presidency, replacing him with a five-man High State Council. At the head of the Council the Army installed Mohammed Boudiaf, a leader from the early days of the revolution,

who had spent the last 28 years in Moroccan exile. The Army then arrested the political leaders of the FIS, Ali Benhadji and Abassi Madanni, forcing the party to go underground.

This led to radical elements taking over the Islamic fundamentalist movement, sparking a wave of "tit-for-tat" violence. Extremists ambushed policemen, bombed universities, destroyed private businesses, and dispensed violence with a special focus on French citizens. The government responded with tougher anti-terrorist laws and banned any businesses with ties to the fundamentalist movement. (13, 242)

And so things went back to normal. The members of the old regime were shifting among top jobs, the black market prospered, and venture capitalists stayed clear of the country due to the political uncertainty. The harder the government crackdown on the fundamentalists, the stronger the resistance countered. In reprisal, semi-official death squads systematically murdered Islamic sympathizers. The fundamentalists responded in kind by targeting secular intellectuals "in a policy not of blind terror but, ... of terror designed to render the people blind." (14, 236)

CIVIL WAR OR CIVIL SOCIETY

So, after two years of democratic efforts designed to cure Algeria's woes, the country finds itself in an uncivilized civil war. The military regime is on one side. These hard-liners make a case for winning time to purge the establishment, undertake social reforms to win over the people, and isolate the fundamentalists. The other side takes the form of several Islamic factions. Experts fear that a victory by these fundamentalists

would signal the beginning of another Islamic dictatorship. This would spur the mass exodus of women and bilingual, French speaking professionals, thus further crippling the economy. It is between these two extremes that the scope for a bargain and a path toward civil society lies.

Last month, such a compromise unfolded in Rome under the auspices of the Sant' Egidio Community, a church-sponsored group of reformist anxious on ending Algerian violence. During this session, a diverse collection of opposition leaders signed a comprehensive document calling for the end of violence in their country, reinstitution of democratic elections, respect for the current constitution, and a dialogue with the regime. This "national contract" stipulated several difficult conditions, such as recognition of the banned Islamic party (the FIS) and release of its imprisoned leaders, before talks with the regime could begin.

The Algerian regime's initial response to the contract was to denounce it as "foreign interference." But signals from within the regime indicate some segments of the party encourage the Sant' Egidio process to continue and announced they might respond more positively in the future. (11, 3) While these movements from Algeria's opposition leaders signal a positive direction in solving the regime's predicament, the European Community has taken only a cautiously positive stand.

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

For the French, no issue, apart from the upcoming presidential elections, commands more attention, or provokes

stronger emotions than Algerian immigration "Without hesitation, French intellectuals, even those on the left, speak of an "Islamic Threat" to Western civilization." (11, 3) The French will do all they can to prevent an Islamic takeover in Algeria, while arresting the current influx of Algerian immigrants that are heavily taxing French coffers and political patience. While the regime's harsh measures have lessened the impact of terrorism bred by the Islamic opposition, violence and refugee migration continue to fuel French skepticism that the crisis can be resolved on the battlefield. The Algerian government's mishandling of several political events, most notably the Christmas Eve airline hijacking, cooled what enthusiasm existed for openly backing the current regime. Increasingly, the French are pushing political dialogue among those seeking democracy as the path to civil peace.

The security of Algeria's close neighbors, specifically Morocco and Tunisia, and in turn the southern flank of Western Europe, has become threatened by Algeria's instability as well. The primary threat Algeria's instability brings to Morocco is from the potential wave of illegal immigrants and the continued spread of Islamic extremism. Morocco allows Islamist movements to organize so long as they do not engage in politics. This is possible because of the legitimacy of the Moroccan throne and the strength of its society and traditions (16, 9) But Morocco is vulnerable to a possible threat from the wave of Islamic fundamentalists escaping the socio-economic problems of Algeria. The threat will manifest itself in the Islamists of Moroccan society as they join their Muslim brothers in an outcry against

income inequality, urbanization, and unemployment. Islam professes solutions to all these problems and readily appeals to the downtrodden.

Political Islam's search for an identity also threatens the stability of Tunisia, albeit to a lesser degree. Tunisia has a much smaller society than Algeria, with a solid, market-oriented economy. It also has its own Islamic movement, which proved far less visible in Tunisia's last election than that of the Algerian movement. This stable and cohesive society could nonetheless hear the cry of the Islamic oppressed as well, when refugees make their way through Tunisia to Italy and points beyond.

Italy and Spain both deal with Algeria's instability on an almost daily basis, as more and more refugees make their way across the Mediterranean and settle in those countries. Both countries have clamped down on illegal immigration as the refugees have become increasingly burdensome for each society. In directing their efforts toward Algeria and the rest of the Maghreb, both countries have also sought to extend bilateral export credits to bolster Algerian industrialization in return for precious oil and gas products. In fact, for these reasons, the Spanish and Italian governments proposed the establishment of a regional security structure, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean, which would include Algeria and the rest of the Maghreb. Clearly, the stability of the political and economic equilibrium in Algeria are paramount to Spain and Italy's efforts to stem the tide of migration from that region.

The European Union (EU) views Algerian unrest as a security

threat due to the impact of mass migration on economic interests in Southern Europe. Unlike the U.S., which historically has taken a military approach to security interests in the Mediterranean, the EU has approached Algeria's problems through economic aid and trade preferences. By developing bilateral trade and aid policies, the EU hopes to reduce the social and economic pressures that have resulted in mass migration from North Africa into Southern Europe. (1, 141)

U.S. POLICY

The United States has taken a relatively neutral stand concerning Algeria's political problems. It remains engaged due to American private venture in the country's vast hydro-carbon resources, concern for human rights violations, and interest for continuation of the stalled democratic process in the country. This neutral stand has resulted in a non-military response as the U.S. has refrained from providing direct military assistance to Algeria. Indirect aid through a modest IMET program of \$50,000 provides instruction to a small number of Algerian military officers in human rights, respect for civilian authority, and responsible resource management. (17, 4) Thus, the ultimate goal of U.S. policy toward Algeria is a peaceful solution that will end civil strife, contain the influx of refugees into Western Europe, and deter radical Islamic gains.

Cables and demarches favoring democratic development, resumption of the electoral process, long term economic reforms, and respect for human rights illustrate this policy. (3) Indeed, the U S has publicly and privately condemned violence and human

rights abuses from all quarters in Algeria, but most of its other involvement is through indirect means.

The U.S. Export-Import Bank provides guarantees for over \$2 billion in private bank loans for projects involving U.S. private interests in the oil and gas sector. Similarly, the Department of Agriculture, as part of the Commodity Credit Corporation program, makes available credit guarantees (up to \$550 million this year) for short term private bank loans to Algerian importers of U.S. agricultural commodities.

SUMMARY

The Sant' Edigio peace plan has provided a glimmer of hope for Algeria's otherwise grim prospects. But prospects for an early peace now seems to have all but evaporated, as militant groups on both sides have increased their political rhetoric and have vowed to fight on.

Several Muslim factions have recently come out openly against the Rome agreement saying that the FIS did not represent their views in these talks. These revelations contradicted earlier signals that the Islamic fundamentalists would abide by the agreement with conditions. This chaotic response is consistent with the views of many experts that the Islamic movement has become too factionalized to speak with one voice.

The current government, led by President Liamine Zeroual, has its share of intransigent foes of any accommodation as well. In an attempt to flush out bands of Islamic terrorists, security forces have answered recent militant violence with the systematic torture of innocent Algerian citizens. Other high-placed

government officials openly advocate eradication of the fundamentalists to "preserve the considerable privileges that the command economy and membership in a feared elite have handed them for generations." (8, 4)

Given the complexities of Algeria's problems and the steadily deteriorating current situation, U.S. influence in resolving the crisis will remain limited. The U.S. firmly believes the best hope for a solution that will guarantee Algeria's internal peace and prosperity lies not in a strategy of repression, but one of inclusion and reconciliation. This solution complements U.S. policy and is consistent with the goals of the European community and some parties of the warring factions in Algeria.

Political hard-liners in Europe and the U.S. criticize the U.S. strategy as too "middle of the road." In the short term, however, this is the correct policy. The best hope for resolving the crisis lies in a strategy of concession and inclusion by all factions in the discord. The nature of the conflict in Algeria's uncivilized civil war does not lend itself to an easy solution. In the end, each faction must agree that eradication of the other will bring no stability to the country or the region. Resolution of this Arab problem must eventually admit Islamic solutions, and vice versa, or Algerians will find their future in *le temps des assassins*.

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