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THE NEXT FUNDAMENTALIST STATE?

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SUMMARY

Algeria is in agony, caught up in a four-year paralyzing spiral of violence that has almost brought the state to its knees. Its ruling junta lacks legitimacy; its November 1995 “presidential elections” excluded representatives of almost all the leading political parties of the country, including the powerful Islamist FIS. The deep civil conflict cannot be resolved and the nation returned to normalcy until genuine parliamentary elections are held in which all significant political parties are represented. The regime seems determined to reject parliamentary elections as long as the FIS stands a chance of gaining a dominant—or even major—voice in the government. Yet the FIS cannot be excluded if national and social reconciliation is to come about. President Liamin Zerwal faces the formidable task of moving his country toward national elections but may be unable, or unwilling, to do so. If he does not, Algeria remains condemned to continuing widespread violence, paralysis, and radicalization of its political forces.

The West needs to ensure that this important country on southern Europe’s doorstep moves gradually toward reconciliation via elections that cannot exclude the FIS—the biggest single winner in the annulled 1991 elections. A potentially major FIS voice in government does carry risks, but the alternatives are worse. A FIS government may be uncongenial to the West but is unlikely to fundamentally threaten Western interests; if *legally* elected, it will be under strong constraints to leave power if not reelected for a second term—as it has promised to do.

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One of the largest and most important states in the Arab world is in a state of virtual civil war. Algeria has become the battleground of a massive ideological struggle pitting conflicting legacies and visions of the future against each other. It is fashionable, and perhaps reassuring to Westerners, to picture the scene in terms of modernism contesting with reactionary or medieval forces. This simplistic vision does not conform with a more complicated reality that involves issues of democracy versus authoritarianism, a challenge to a corrupt and failed elitist rule, the search for cultural and political "authenticity," class struggle, a European versus an Arab orientation, generational differences, the imperialist legacy, and a huge debate over what it is to be "modern." Between the present regime and its Islamist opponents, there are no obvious champions of a "right" cause with whom Westerners can feel comfortable.

THE SOURCE OF FIS STRENGTH

The Algerian "fundamentalist" movement, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS in French), is likely to gain a major voice in the power equation of the Algerian state within the next few years—although not necessarily absolute power. The existing regime—basically a military junta—is intellectually and politically bankrupt; the country is racked by the bloody beginnings of what could yet be full-scale civil war. The current ruling junta—reaping the legacy of years of mismanagement and strict authoritarian control by the army and its National Liberation Front (FLN in French) that had ruled the country since independence in 1962—has no effective answers to Algeria's present crisis except to hold onto power through force and hope for better times. Hard-line military officers at the top of the system are adamant about excluding the FIS from power at all costs, and will pursue only a military option to defeat it.

The FIS is the single strongest and most popular political alternative in the country, and it has already won a clear plurality in Algeria's first and only free national elections in late 1991—only to see the results annulled by the army. Today it would almost certainly win a plurality again, if not a slim majority. The FIS has strong ties with the grass roots of the population, and understands mass grievances better than almost any other party, especially among the urban poor, lower middle class, and marginalized educated class—all of which

lack housing, jobs, and social services—the legacy of decades of FLN misrule. Despite a FIS grasp of what is wrong with the nation and a high degree of neighborhood social activism, like many other Islamist movements in other countries, it purveys a message rather long on abstract principles, short on details, and fond of the slogan that “Islam is the answer.”

Although political violence had been relatively limited before the late 1991 elections, the FIS felt compelled to turn to it following the military’s annulment of the election results and the subsequent eradication of the party as a political entity by force and massive arrests. Since early 1992, the spiral of violence has risen dramatically—as much as 50,000 dead on both sides in a brutal and bloody confrontation. It will be difficult to stop the logic of events that is leading to the government’s increasing marginalization, loss of support, and eventual collapse.

The FIS had had a year or two experience of power, at the municipal level in various cities in Algeria in 1990–1991, in which it was neither especially radical nor especially effective. Today, while decrying the clear defects of the Algerian state and society, the FIS has no clear-cut program of action on national problems, other than some general principles that are unclear in their specific policy implications. It is seriously divided internally, between radicals and moderates, and about what policies to adopt. Three years of sustained and brutal violence in clashes between the government and the FIS have polarized the country, strengthening radical forces within the FIS, reinforcing hard-liners within the regime, and spawning a number of dangerous, independent, militant armed radical groups operating outside of FIS control.

FIS ROOTS IN ALGERIAN POLITICAL CULTURE

While the FIS represents a seemingly radical alternative to the old ruling National Liberation Front (FLN), in many ways the FIS actually shares many important qualities with the FLN—in psychological outlook and political culture. The FIS, in power, is likely to reflect a great deal more about Algeria than about Islam:

- Algerian political culture includes powerful elements of xenophobia, born especially of 130 years of colonialism (including

millions of French colons then living in Algeria), and a long, brutal, and bloody struggle against the French for an independence that was attained only as late as 1962.

- Algeria—itself one of the major symbols of anticolonial struggle as powerful as Vietnam—since independence has been deeply involved in the Third World movement, complete with a strong antiimperialist ideology and a tradition of strong support for other Third World radical movements in Cuba, South Africa, Vietnam, Mozambique, etc. It has maintained a sense of mission toward international struggle—even if sobered by its own problems over the last decade and showing increasing pragmatism.
- Algeria has a long tradition of state socialism, the most intense in the Arab world.
- As a postcolonial culture, the country nourishes deep anti-French currents (but with a touch of ambivalence), is fiercely independent-minded, and extremely prickly toward the outside world.
- It has a tradition of suspicion of the outside world in general, of the international political order it sees dominated by great Western powers, and of the international economic order, which it sees as rigged against the interests of the Third World. Algeria tends to be austere and egalitarian as a political culture.
- Algeria, despite its socialist outlook, has always included Islam as a basic element of its political creed and national identity.
- But it also has a tradition of realism and sober-mindedness, even while pursuing a more radical foreign policy. It has a history of honoring legality and negotiation, even while adopting radical positions in that context. Since independence, it has not employed international terror in support of radical national goals.
- It has been engaged in an ongoing search for national identity, never having constituted a clear-cut historical region until the era of French colonialism (unlike Morocco and Tunisia, which have very well established identities going back over a thousand years). The search for Algerian identity has especially invoked Arabic and Arab nationalism. Yet the Algerian identity is also Franco-Mediterranean and Berber—20 percent of the population

speak Berber and perhaps 75 percent of the population are Berber in blood, although now fully Arabized.

It is almost certain that Algeria will continue to demonstrate most of these same qualities under any future FIS rule, to one extent or another.

CONJECTURES ON THE FIS IN POWER

It is impossible to predict with any certainty the policies of the FIS in power; its behavior will depend greatly upon the precise conditions under which it comes to power, and the specific personalities that emerge on top. In general, the longer the bloody struggle with the state goes on, the more radicalized the FIS will likely become. But based on what is known about Algeria, the FIS, and the experience of other Islamist parties and regimes in the region, some speculation is at least possible. This study offers a tentative map of the political terrain that lies in the future—subject to adjustment as more specific knowledge is gained about FIS operating characteristics.

First, on the international level, the FIS in power will probably demonstrate broad internal divisions—including how “international Islamic” as opposed to “national Islamic” its policy and ideological orientation should be. Initially the FIS will be overwhelmed by the magnitude of internal challenges and will probably not develop an immediate activist foreign policy. Over time, however, activism is likely to grow. Its key characteristics will probably include:

- Fierce independence; activism in Third World—but especially Muslim world affairs—on the bilateral level, international organization level (various Third World forums), and in the UN; for this purpose Algeria has a highly accomplished diplomatic corps.
- Assistance to other Islamist movements—not necessarily violent ones—in neighboring countries and the region; this does not necessarily mean a protracted effort to overthrow neighboring regimes, but these efforts will almost certainly be viewed by neighbors as threatening, partly in view of their own vulnerabilities.
- The sheer fact of the FIS gaining power in Algeria will have major psychological impact in the region by emboldening other Is-

lamist movements, especially in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco—although the prospect of Islamist victories in those states will depend basically on the internal dynamics of each country rather than on Algeria's support. The FIS nonetheless can offer support to these movements in the form of asylum, financial aid, and even weapons—although most of the other Islamist movements have not been violent, except in Egypt.

- The FIS could easily be drawn into conflict with neighboring Morocco, with whom Algeria has had uneasy relations for decades. The two states are geopolitical rivals in the region, dispute borders (given by the French to Algeria), and have used the Saharan Liberation Front (or Polisario Front) in southeastern Morocco as a proxy of direct war. King Hassan of Morocco, on the other hand, has made a point of keeping good relations with the FIS.
- The FIS will likely refuse to normalize relations with Israel and will rhetorically denounce the peace process, but it will also be unlikely to significantly affect the peace process. An Islamist Algeria can, however, contribute to the maintenance of a generally negative attitude about the peace process still existing among some states of the Muslim world.
- The FIS will show a keen desire for higher gas and oil prices (a goal shared by most energy-producing states, but not easily accomplished); but economic goals, and not ideology per se, will influence the FIS's conduct of bilateral energy sales to the region.
- The FIS will probably demonstrate a strong interest in supporting Islamist movements in Africa south of the Sahara—possibly even as a potential rival to Iran.
- FIS will display a realism about dealing with the international economic order—despite discontent with it—and perhaps make some efforts to move it in more equitable directions over time. Algerian Islamist realism may contrast sharply with the Iranian lack of realism. Algeria is likely to accept and work with the international order, even while perhaps working to change it. It will not act as a “revolutionary” power toward the world as Iran has done.

- While FIS relations with the United States will of course be a two-way street, the FIS is *not* necessarily likely to seize upon the United States as the main source of Algerian problems or as the “Great Satan”—despite past FLN ideology in the 1960s and 1970s that often portrayed the United States as the center of imperialism. The United States actually has an unusual policy opportunity to defuse a major moment in the evolution of regional Islamist movements: It actually carries little historical baggage in Algeria, and the FIS considers it more “objective” than Europe about Islam, despite the strong pro-Israeli bent in U.S. policies. The FIS favors the teaching of English in Algeria as a culturally “neutral” language, as opposed to French. U.S. citizens, remarkably, so far have not been victims of violence—unlike other foreigners—by radical groups in Algeria.
- While U.S.-FIS relations should thus start out on a relatively neutral level, both sides are capable of allowing an escalation of tensions to occur through ideological overreaction to each other which, sufficiently mishandled, could result in the demonization of the United States.
- The FIS is likely to welcome U.S. private-sector investment in Algeria and to undertake close commercial relations with the United States.
- The FIS will be determined—as was the FLN—to make Algeria into a great regional power, including interest in the potential of developing nuclear weapons consonant with that status.
- The FIS has no tradition of international terrorist action abroad in general, but Algeria did use terrorism effectively against France during its long armed struggle for independence; terror has recently been exported to France, resulting in at least 17 different incidents as of November 1995, perpetrated by a radical armed movement.
- The FIS has long had good ties with Saudi Arabia and received a great deal of Saudi funding until recent years when the FIS adopted—somewhat belatedly—a pro-Saddam position in the Gulf War in keeping with the general mood of the population. A key ideological turning point will be whether or not FIS chooses to make Saudi Arabia an ideological enemy.

- Algeria as a state enjoyed good relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran until 1993, when relations were broken because of Iranian support for the FIS. The FIS in power will certainly seek to restore cordial relations with Iran, but it will emphatically not follow any Iranian lead; an Islamist Algeria indeed could ultimately become an Islamic rival to Iran in Africa over the longer run.
- The FIS has had good relations with Islamist Sudan as well and will work to maintain them; the FIS in power, however, might well ultimately find itself a rival with Sudan for power in Africa as well as for influence over Islamist movements there.

Domestically, the FIS in power will face serious problems in reversing a serious socioeconomic crisis of massive unemployment, debt, lack of housing, dwindling social services, and fraying urban life as well as a legacy of bitterness on all sides due to several years of brutal killings. Unfortunately, the FIS as of now has no clear-cut policies to address these urgent problems, other than to diversify the economy and seek investment; the FIS will be forced to improvise to a considerable extent and will be heavily dependent on drawing in educated bureaucratic and technical cadres to manage the state.

In the social arena, the FIS will almost surely seek to impose a level of Islamic austerity as a way of life—in dress (especially for women), ban of public sale of alcohol, and censorship of films and TV. It will not oppose women in the workplace but may strive to separate them there where readily feasible. It will probably adopt separate-sex educational institutions. There could be some nominal efforts initially to impose a few of the more draconian traditional Islamic punishments, but such punishments are not likely to dominate the penal structure for long—even Islamists disagree over this issue. All these austerities of lifestyle may be uncongenial to Westerners, and to many Algerians as well, but they are already familiar to many Westerners from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, etc. Adoption of these practices should be of no strategic concern to the West unless gross violations of human rights should take place outside the context of austere Islamic law.

The FIS may actually have some positive contributions to make in the area of social programs. It has a close understanding of, and involvement in, coping with problems of the urban poor and is actively

interested in the need to organize communal and neighborhood organizations, self-help movements, student and women's groups, sports facilities, better social services, etc. There will be immense pressure on the FIS to "deliver" in social terms, given the public disillusionment with the long failures of the FLN and subsequent junta rule. The FIS might also be able to substantially reduce corruption—at least for a while, and introduce other broader social reforms.

Impelled by a desire not to see the FIS/Islamist experiment fail, especially in the public eye, the FIS will likely be populist in orientation, thus requiring substantial income. The FIS will therefore be tempted to turn to some broader redistributive program to avoid social collapse. The FIS has no philosophical opposition to privatization per se, but many practical reasons, including long-term socialist precedents, issues of power, and control over the process of social change, will make it difficult for the regime to proceed with economic liberalization.¹ The need for revenue will probably inject realism into FIS international relations, more than is the case in Iran, or even Sudan. If the FIS comes to power via the ballot box, the pressures to produce at a visible public level will be even greater than power via a coup, as in Sudan.

IMPACT ON WESTERN INTERESTS

From a U.S. point of view, a FIS regime is not the most desirable government for Algeria, compared to a less ideological and more pragmatic coalition of parties—perhaps including the FIS. The FIS is untested and lacks a rigorously clear program, and its democratic intentions are open to debate. The FIS will not be as "convenient" to deal with as was the FLN or the current junta has been: it will harbor a general anti-Western suspicion and will likely present a number of regional problems. But the United States does not have much choice in the matter. The present situation under the current junta is unacceptable over the longer run and only polarizes the country more deeply. The junta, left to its own devices, is not likely to be able to rise to the occasion to rid itself of its authoritarian elements, although the November 1995 presidential elections (honest but unrep-

¹A new Islamist regime in Sudan, under much less pressure, did in fact make serious efforts to follow IMF strictures for a year or more.

representative) offer a small hope that President Liamin Zerwal may now feel he has greater strength to overcome the hard-liners within his own ranks. Just as possibly, however, and without major external pressure, Zerwal may continue to isolate legitimate political parties from rule, especially the FIS. Long-term nonconstitutional isolation of the FIS from the process will continue to destabilize the Algerian political system.

The West is thus almost certain to encounter the FIS as a major player in Algerian politics in some form. It might, furthermore, well be able to live with a FIS regime. The FIS is unlikely to present a massive challenge to U.S. and Western interests, even if it will prove prickly and difficult on the international scene; it could also prove ineffective in power and thus perhaps eventually gravitate toward authoritarian means as its policies over time suffer public rejection. It almost surely will not resemble Iran in psychological character or style. If the present Algerian spectacle of major civil strife and radicalization continues indefinitely, however, the more mainstream elements of the FIS movement are likely to become marginalized and the radicals empowered. Past Algerian government policies will then bear direct responsibility for the radicalization of the movement that was not so strongly present before, and in ways that now threaten the Algerian political scene for many years to come.

The problems of Western coexistence with ideological Islamist regimes will perhaps recur in several other Muslim countries as well, where Islamists gain a major voice in government or populations express long-pent-up grievances that include anger (both rational and irrational) at Western power, wealth, and dominance of the international order. While Western states would clearly prefer to deal with regimes that are pro-Western, old-style attempts by the West to determine the outcome of political processes in Third World states are clearly far less feasible today—or acceptable in the eyes of the world—and would tend only to delay the day of political reckoning. Change is simply long overdue in states like Algeria; when it comes, the process will, by definition, be somewhat destabilizing.

SCENARIOS BY WHICH THE FIS GAINS POWER

The question then is not so much whether the FIS will come to power, but *how*, and to what degree. Scenarios of FIS ascendancy to

power via chaos, violence, government collapse, even social revolution, clearly present the worst possible political environment in which all political and social structures are destroyed, thereby facilitating the emergence of the most radical elements. Continuation of present hard-line policies by the Algerian regime in the end promises that very scenario—continued violence, turmoil, and the eventual collapse of a regime that cannot manage the crisis. But two other, more peaceful, alternatives exist for FIS accession to a major role in governance:

- First, a nondemocratic “deal” in which the military negotiates an agreement to share power with the FIS in a nondemocratic order; such an agreement perpetuates the absence of democratic governance in Algeria and simply delays the ultimate political showdown. But under these circumstances, the FIS would at least operate within a more controlled situation, developing its policies under some constraint, while gaining experience and hopefully wisdom about the exercise of power and administration. So far the FIS has rejected this “Sudanese solution” as a rejection of its call for democratic governance. Such a deal would also alienate the other major parties in Algeria who have supported the legalization of the FIS.
- A second, democratic, alternative would call for new elections in which the FIS might win a plurality to form a government, probably with other parties. This is perhaps the most desirable scenario for the longer-range development of Algerian politics, but could well be a messy sort of democratic coalition in the short term as all parties sought to learn, and work, the system. It would be the first time Islamists came to national power via the ballot box in the Middle East.

An electoral victory would place considerable psychological and moral strictures on the FIS not to “cancel democracy” thereafter, since it would be expected to depart office via the same means it took office; but obviously there could be absolutely no guarantees that this would take place. The FIS has nonetheless committed itself repeatedly to the democratic process, including the principle of “alternation” of parties in power, in joint statements made with the other major parties of Algeria. These commitments are hardly iron-clad—very few Middle Eastern ruling parties of any stripe have given

up power willingly via the democratic process—but they provide the domestic and international order with some grounds for pressuring the regime, or declaring it illegitimate, should it fail to honor its obligations.

The FIS in power will probably fail to achieve success in many of Algeria's most pressing problems—given their magnitude and complexity and the FIS's political inexperience at the national level. The prospect of failure in subsequent elections could well impel the FIS to reconsider pledges to reconvene elections, pleading the need for more time to implement its program. But the FIS must ultimately be demystified and come to take its place as a "normal" political party in political process, bereft of any sense of "magic" that the Islamist program now has for much of the population. In the end, the FIS is unlikely to depart radically from the political culture of Algeria—a culture that has had very limited experience—but nonetheless a quite vital interval—with democratic practice.

U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The United States has quite limited influence in Algeria. Nonetheless, Washington is capable of helping forge a Western consensus about creating a process in Algeria that would restore the prospects for free elections and open a way to end the conflict. Priority must therefore go to the emergence of a political compromise that includes all parties that eschew violence. But several fundamental philosophical/political issues must be confronted:

- Is the United States willing to inaugurate democratic processes in which the Islamists stand a very good chance of gaining a significant voice in power?
- What steps can Washington take to create a broader European entente to coordinate an approach to the Algerian problem—particularly including France, Spain, Italy, and Portugal? France regards Algeria as its region of special influence, yet recognizes that its present policies are at an impasse and have now brought terror into Paris itself. Southern European states are interested in coordinating policies on this complex issue; most have relatively enlightened views of the problem and an awareness that a military solution can never bring a settlement.

- What steps can Western states take to encourage a democratic restoration in Algeria? First, economic sticks could withhold further loans or loan rescheduling to Algeria until a political dialog is begun. Economic incentives as well can be offered as political progress is made. Failing that, the legitimacy of the regime can also be questioned until certain steps toward dialog take place. The military can be offered selected carrots and sticks for returning to the barracks.
- The question of terror needs careful consideration: can the junta maintain violence against the FIS as a party with the aim of perpetuating a violent response—whereby the FIS thus becomes a “terrorist organization” and outside of any political compromise?

A European accord on a democratic resolution will give nearly all political parties, including the FIS, a great deal of what they want. Such an accord might also lend a solemnity and an internationally monitored institutional character to that process that will make it harder, but certainly not impossible, for the FIS later to renege on prolongation of democracy in subsequent elections—even at the cost of losing such elections. U.S. policy should also be marked by principle, i.e., above all the principle of establishing electoral procedures in Algeria—even at the risk that the FIS will win a major voice in government through that process. A U.S. policy driven by the goal of preventing the FIS from gaining a major voice in government becomes simply a further perversion of democratic process, sending the wrong message to the region and delaying the hope of any normalization in Algerian politics or in Islamist parties. The ascendance of FIS cannot likely be staved off; to try to do so will only increase violence and delay the process whereby political Islam loses its special status and falls into “normal political perspective” in the region.