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Algeria: a Regional Leader or a Potentially Unstable State?

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ABSTRACT. *The article analyzes the opportunities and threats facing the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria at the moment. Algeria has the potential to become a regional leader in one of the most strategically important regions of the world in a number of parameters. These are natural and human resources, stable economic and diplomatic ties with the Arab world, Europe and America. Both the major powers and the neighbours in the region have placed their hopes in Algeria as a key partner in the efforts to ensure security and combat terrorism. The Algerian authorities seek to present their country as a strong regional leader, free from the internal divisions and extremism that have plagued other Arab States. However, in reality the situation is more complicated, Algeria is a potentially unstable state. At the moment, Algeria is in a difficult situation, given both the internal situation and the danger posed from the outside. The main reason for the political and economic uncertainty in the country is the expectations and fears associated with the upcoming change of power, the presidential elections are scheduled for 2019. Algeria's socio-economic sphere was another*

vulnerable place that could, in case of unfavourable developments, create instability. The Berber issue, which threatens the unity of the country, is one of the long-standing major problems of the Algeria. The confrontation between Algeria and Morocco on the Western Sahara issue has led to keep on the zone of instability in the region and has contributed to the terrorist threats. Over the past decade, Algeria has had to pay increasing attention and resources to regional security issues. In this area, Algeria has demonstrated its commitment to peaceful diplomacy, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and rejection of any external role of its armed forces. This position has brought the Republic international recognition as a regional leader and a reliable partner in the fight against terrorism.

KEY WORDS: *Algeria, regional leadership, threat of instability, terrorism, socio-economic difficulties, Berber question*

A range of features of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria endows it with the potential to become a leader in one of the most strategically important ar-

eas of the world. If we take into account economic and military capabilities, its influence and authority in the region and in the world, as well as prominent resources, one will see that Algeria has a formal claim to the title of a regional power, which to this day was only held by Egypt in North Africa. The country possesses such important **resources as a beneficial geographical location at the border of Europe, the Mediterranean, the Arab world and Africa; one of the richest oil and gas reserves in the continent and a positive demographics, with the young being in the majority.**

Algeria has a powerful and capable army, baptised by the fire of the civil war of 1991–1999, which is now one of the pillars of civic peace in the country.

The Republic's has independent foreign policy, which allows it to expand diplomatic relations to strengthen and deepen trade links. Algeria collaborates with neighbouring Arab states and benefits from close relations with the EU. Thanks to its historical links, Europe, and France in particular, remains Algeria's closest partner. The PDRA signed the 2002 Association Agreement with the EU and expressed its eagerness to enter into negotiations to develop an Action Plan under the European Neighbourhood Policy and Partnership in 2011. In 2018 the EU remains Algeria's largest trade ally, holding over half of the overall trade of the State – 50,3%.¹ In the meantime, Algeria and the US continue to develop their relations both economically, and in terms of ensuring stability in the region and fighting terrorism. This north African country has a traditionally good relationship with Russia, being one of its top-3 economic partners on the African continent.

After successfully eliminating the threat of Islamic extremism in the early

2000s and establishing a peaceful political process, many countries of the world-leading powers and regional actors alike, looked at the PDRA as a key partner in the fight against terrorism and guaranteeing peace in North Africa. Algeria has a vital interest in the elimination of the threat, coming from the jihadist terror groups in the region. Strong and experienced security services are key partners to their counterparts in the USA and France [*Dolgov*, 2018, p. 54]. Without any active cooperation from Algeria, it would be extremely hard to promote the security of the neighbouring Tunisia, weakened by the onset of the crisis following the “Jasmine revolution” in 2011 [*Sami Aoun* 2013, p. 77]. Absent the political weight of Algeria, it would be impossible to see the end of the civil war in Libya. Algeria's influence spans outside of North Africa too, as it views the Sahel Region as an area of its strategic interests, with the overall cementing of its leadership here being one of the main priorities in its foreign policy. This is also evidenced by the PDRA's involvement in the conflict in Mali.

In the climate of conflicts and crises enveloping the Middle East and North Africa in recent years, the existence of such a strong actor as Algeria should inspire optimism. The Algerian authorities aim to represent their state as a strong regional leader free from internal struggle and extremism, which torment other Arab states. However, in reality the situation is more complicated, as Algeria is facing threats to its stability. At the current moment, the country finds itself in a complicated situation, considering its domestic affairs, as well as the dangers originating outside. A range of threats such as internal political struggle, economic problems, the rise of Islamic terrorism, which both

1 Countries and Regions: Algeria (n/y) // European Commission // <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/algeria/>, accessed 12.10.2018.

individually and collectively may lead to destabilization.

The main reason for the political and economic uncertainty in the country is the expectations and fears regarding the coming change of power and the changes in the state-party and law enforcement elites. A few months remain before the next presidential election in the Algeria, scheduled for 2019, yet there is still no clarity, regarding who will be nominated by the ruling party. There is an option that this will again be the current president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, ruling the country for the past 19 years, despite his advanced age (81 years) and deteriorating health. This option may be pushed forward by the President's entourage: that is, his younger brother and personal advisor Saïd Bouteflika.

The events of recent years point to the escalation of the domestic political tension: high-profile resignations in government and party leadership, the purge of the security forces, arrests, and real prison sentences for a number of high-ranking military officials, laws aimed against journalists, and anyone who "undermines the foundations." 2017 was a record year in the history of Algeria, since by August 2017 the country had received their third prime minister that year. The main struggle is unfolding between the clan of Saïd Bouteflika and the Deputy Minister of Defense and the Chief of Staff of the National Army Ahmed Gaid Salah. The president's brother is seeking to monopolize the right to choose a successor while intending to prevent the military from gaining strength and limit their ambitions in power. This position runs counter to the historical heritage of Algeria as a country, where the role of the Army has tradition-

ally been determinative throughout the past decades. It was precisely due to the Army's interference that it became possible to avoid the Islamists' coming to power and announcing an Islamic republic in 1992 in the course of an armed struggle between the government and the Islamic radicalists. General Salah opposes the undermining of the Army's role in defining the country's fate. Without personally competing for the presidential post, he believes that it is the army that must and will continue to play the role of the main constitutional guarantor, remaining one of the foundational institutes of Algeria's political system.

It is doubtful that the 2019 presidential election will see a strong candidate being nominated by any of the opposing parties. Although much has been done during the years of Bouteflika's rule to create and develop multi-party rule in the country and in the People's National Assembly of Algeria, a variety of parties coexist – from the left-socialist Trotskyite to the moderately Islamist and national Berber ones, but on the political scene, only two remain dominant: the National Liberation Front and the National Democratic Union, which support Bouteflika. The current trends were confirmed in the May 2017 parliamentary election, with two pro-presidential parties gaining an absolute majority of 164 plus 97 votes.²

The Islamic Union for Justice, Renaissance and Development [Islamic Renaissance Movement and Front for Justice and Development], which comprises the "Movement of Society for Peace", "El Islah" and "Ennahda", gained 48 seats³. These three parties practice moderate Islamism, with their leaders positioning themselves

2 Mamed-zade P. (2017) V Alzhire prohodiat ocherednye parlamentskie vybory [A new Parliamentary election is underway in Algeria]// TASS-online.ru. 4 May 2017.

3 Caputo S. (2015) Immuni dal Terrorismo: il Segreto dell'Algeria // Il Giornale, November 25, 2015 // <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/mondo/immuni-terrorismo-segreto-dellalgeria-1198334.html>, accessed 12.10.2018.

as part of the systemic opposition, and mainly supporting economic and political reforms advanced by President Bouteflika. The extreme left Trotskyist workers' Party (11 seats) and the Front of Socialist Forces (14 seats) and the Rally for Culture and Democracy (9 seats) are represented in the new parliament, advocating for the democratic and secular development of Algeria and the observance of the rights of the Berber population.

This modest result achieved by the Algerian Islamic parties is in stark contrast to the recent successes of their fellows in neighbouring north-African countries. Thus, Tunisia and Morocco saw the Islamic parties if not win, then demonstrate high results, evidencing the demand for and the promising prospects of this ideology [Dolgov, 2017, p. 112]. The results of the Algerian election evidence a certain decrease in the support of the radical Islamists in the country after a decade of civil war, as well as distrust towards the political process, with the ruling party having won each election in the past 20 years. The number of Algerians, boycotting the elections is also rather high, and it reaches 55%⁴, the majority of which closely adhere to the religious ideology. In Algeria, in recent years, a powerful ultra-conservative Salafi movement has been formed, preaching the rejection of politics and distancing from it, and prohibiting its leaders and adherents to participate in the elections [Landa 2014, c. 139]. For Islamic parties to have prospects on Algeria's political scene, they must transform themselves from religious to political institutions. It is believed that the dominance of a charismatic leader or Sheikh-founder needs to be supplemented or replaced by a democratic election

procedure. A weak spot for both Algerian and other North African political Islam parties is the lack of a practical plan, knowledge, and experience of public administration. The Muslim Brotherhood's unexpected rise and rapid fall from the Olymp of state power in Egypt and that of Ennahda in Tunisia in the course of the "Arab spring" and "Arab winter" testify to the insufficiency of religious and ideological rhetoric in solving practical social issues. The parties of this inclination must overcome an additional hurdle of persuading the citizens of Algeria that they offer a valid solution to their economic and social problems without threatening the security and stability of the state.

Algeria's social and economic sphere is another vulnerable issue, which may undermine its stability in an unfavourable course of events. The painful switch from authoritarianism to pluralism at the end of the 1980s and the ensuing "dark decade" of the confrontation between the secularists and the Islamists and the difficult and fragile period of the political settlement in the 2000-s left the country with little chance of a speedy economic prosperity. The wealth of carbon resources enabled Algeria to remain afloat during these crises, but the country still lacks a diversified economy, able to cater to the demands of its active population.

By the beginning of the "Arab Spring" in the neighbouring states in 2011, Algeria's social and economic problems remained unresolved. Largely, these problems are common for all states of the Maghreb: high levels of unemployment, especially among the young, and housing. The unemployment reached 11% in 2011, with Algeria's GDP per capita ranked 126th in the world, and 15-20% of its pop-

4 Amayas Zmirli (2017) Algérie: Quand Gronde la Rage Sourde du Boycott et de l'Abstention // Le Point, November 23, 2017 // http://afrique.lepoint.fr/actualites/algerie-elections-locales-entre-boycott-et-abstention-22-11-2017-2174242_2365.php, accessed 12.10.2018.

ulation living below the poverty line.⁵ The “Arab Spring” in Algeria began with the protests in the poor neighbourhood of Bab El Oued in the capital. The demonstrations were aimed at the growing cost of living, mass unemployment and housing deficit. The protests were growing larger and larger and spread to other regions of Algeria, eventually taking over 20 out of 48 provinces of the country [*Salah Hadji* 2014, p. 38]. However, thanks to the swift and adequate reaction of the government, who took a step towards the protesters and raised the minimum wage and revoked the state of emergency, – the protests of the “Arab Spring” were quickly on the wane.

The PDRA’s economy’s unsustainability has repeatedly shown itself in the past decade, with its 97% of export revenue deriving from oil. The collapse of global oil and gas prices is forcing the government to cut down on the broad array of subsidies they traditionally provide to the poorest, and social stability immediately comes in danger. The government already had to increase certain taxes, while simultaneously increasing fuel, electricity and gas prices. The protest moods were further strengthened by the increase in prices on essential food products, such as milk, flour, and sugar. The economic crisis likewise hit the middle class of Algeria, with the government reducing social aid programmes and firing 40% of government employees out of necessity⁶. The budget, adopted by the PDRA’s Parliament for 2017, provided for strict economy and the introduction of new taxes. The prices of fuel, utilities, housing, household appliances and food all experienced an increase. These prices rose by 10-15%. According to a range

of experts, these measures were incapable of improving the situation, since they were a simple attempt to patch up holes in the budget without exploring new venues for the national economy. However, they affected the purchasing power of the Algerians. Social strife, the dissatisfaction of the population and the protests led the government in mid-2017 to set aside their programme of strict economy and increase spending, which resulted in the growth recovery prediction of 4% in 2018. Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia stated that the subsidies of the Algerian government for fuel, milk and bread would not be abolished. According to him, “Algeria has an unchanging social policy based on social justice and national solidarity”⁷. The combination of low global oil prices and higher government spending increased the budget deficit in 2017. In the spring of 2018, the IMF and the World Bank warned the Algerian government that reliance on expansionary monetary policy to finance the budgetary deficit could lead to a sharp rise in inflation and trade deficits.

Another dangerous consequence of the Algerian economy’s overreliance on resources is the driving out of the country of qualified citizens who opt to migrate to Canada, US and the EU, only to be replaced with less-educated African migrants. This creates a deficit of qualified personnel, which may incite political or economic problems. Such a structure of the economy may turn even a positive demographical factor – the predominance of the young population – into a threat to the system’s stability. It is for this reason that the Algerian authorities appreciate the French visa support, which allows them to transfer unemployed Algeri-

5 Merkulov A. (2016) Alzhir usilivaet mery bezopasnosti [Algeria is enhancing its security measures]// TASS-online.ru. 17 February 2016.

6 The Report Algeria 2017 (2017), Oxford Business Group // <https://www.pwc.fr/fr/assets/files/pdf/2018/02/the-report-algeria-2017.pdf>, accessed 12.10.2018.

7 Lamine Ghanmi (2018) Algeria Halts Hundreds of Imports to Save Foreign Reserves // The Arab Weekly, January 14, 2018.

an youth into the EU, which therefore eases social tensions and ensures social stability in the vulnerable Algerian society. That is to say nothing of the cash flow arriving in the country.

Among the long-standing problems facing PDRA is the Berber issue, threatening the integrity of the country. The Berbers, the indigenous population of North Africa, are represented by various ethnic groups in Algeria, comprising about 25–30% of the population. The split of the Algerian society began in the 1960s, when they adopted the course to build a unitary state, built on Arab-Islamic culture. This rigid Arabisation and the suppression of the Berber culture sparked an expected reaction: the Berbers protested and repeatedly caused uprisings. Thanks to the “political spring” of 1989, the Berber minority received an opportunity to participate in the political life of the country and advocate for their cultural and political rights. In 1991–1992 the authorities of the country softened their policy of Arabization: it was now allowed to teach the Berber culture in the countries universities, and 1995 saw the assembly of the World Amazigh Congress (the name used by the Berbers). It is precisely the Berbers who were the staunchest opponents of the radical Islamists during the civil war: among other things, they also had a divide in culture and civilization. During the rule of A. Bouteflika, the Algerian government undertook certain steps to meet the demands of the Berber opposition. For example, the Parliament legally recognised the identity of the Berber minority, and in 2015 the Berber language achieved the status of the second official state language. The government adopted a special programme to improve the social and economic conditions in Kabylie, a region, where the Berbers reside. The Berber political parties are represented in the Parliament.

Despite these achievements, representatives of the Berber population continue

to insist that the programs and laws adopted by the authorities do not work, remaining fictitious. In their view, of all the countries in which the Berbers live, it is Algeria that holds the lead in terms of the suppression of the national rights of this minority. Berber representatives cite the following facts: Since the adoption of the law on language in 2015, the state has allocated funding only for 1% of the rates of teachers of the Berber language in secondary and higher educational institutions [Balmasov 2017].

Another frequent rebuke to the authorities of the Berber minority rights defenders is that the authorities refuse to register Berber newborn children under national names on the pretext of the absence of such names in the State Register. The World Amazigh Congress, which saw this situation as a manifestation of deliberate Arabization, encourages Berbers to simultaneously conduct their own registration of children.

Disappointment in the legitimate way of struggle for national rights is reflected in the fall of support for the official parliamentary parties of the Berbers “Front of Socialist Forces” and “Rally for Culture and Democracy”. Members of the national minority accuse them of acquiescence. At the same time, the positions of radicals and separatists are dangerously strengthened, such as the “Movement for the autonomy of Kabylie”.

At a time when the Maghreb countries are being hit by political turmoil, social instability, and a terrorist threat, unity and mutual understanding between the leaders of neighbouring states are more necessary than ever to maintain stability in the region. But one of the challenges to achieving cohesion and mutual support is the longstanding regional conflicts. One of the most complex and dangerous for the future of North Africa is the Western Sahara conflict. Its origins lie in the colonial past, and the overt conflict – the “Sand War” be-

tween Algeria and Morocco – occurred in 1963. When, in 1976, the Polisario Front declared Western Sahara's independence, proclaiming the self-proclaimed state of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), Morocco continued to insist on its sovereignty over the territory, and pursued a policy of intense settlement of "indigenous" Moroccans to ensure their subsequent economic integration with the rest of Morocco. Now the SADR remains a partially recognized state, affecting the relations of the neighbouring Arab countries' by the conflict's unresolved nature. Algeria and Morocco have defiantly rejected any joint search for a compromise on the issue of Western Sahara. Algeria is advocating for the self-determination of the Western Saharan people, condemning the Moroccan position. The leadership of the PDRA demands that a referendum be held on the independence of Western Sahara. Algeria still houses a large number of refugees from Western Sahara. The ongoing conflict has led to the persistence of a zone of instability in the region and has contributed to the perpetuation of the terrorist threat, as many terrorists have attracted to their side the population that is dissatisfied with the central government or the absence thereof, as in the case of Western Sahara.

The confrontation between Algeria and Morocco in Western Sahara leads to the fact that the two countries see each other as competitors both regionally and even at the African level. Morocco's stable political and economic development in recent decades has enabled the Kingdom to challenge Algeria's status as the regional leader. Morocco currently leads the African continent in terms of economic growth and investment [the Africa Investment Report 2016]. The Kingdom's economic

achievements are also turning into political dividends: while Morocco's position on the Western Sahara issue is being criticized internationally, its position in the African Union has visibly strengthened.

Over the past decade, Algeria has had to devote more attention and resources to counter the problems of regional security. The turmoil in Tunisia and Egypt, Libya's civil war, the Tuareg rebellion in Mali, and the relocation of terrorist fighters from combat zones in Syria and Iraq to conflict and crisis zones in Libya, the Sahel region, the Horn of Africa, and the Lake Chad basin required the leaders of the PDRA to formulate a new emergency international strategy. And the great achievement of Bouteflika's government was their choice of peaceful diplomacy and socio-economic means to combat terrorism [Sapronova 2016, p. 575]. Algeria has demonstrated its commitment to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and its opposition to any external role of its armed forces. It is this position that has brought the republic international recognition as a regional leader and reliable partner in the fight against terrorism.

It was Algeria that had been working to develop a comprehensive strategy for Africa to counter foreign intervention on the continent under the pretext of combating terrorism. In all its diplomatic and military efforts to combat terrorism at the African level, Algeria seeks to emphasize the principle of the "Africanization of solutions". Algeria is actively cooperating with the African Police Cooperation Organization (AFRIPOL), which should join the efforts of the countries of the continent in combating the various challenges that threaten the security and stability of Africa⁸.

In the Sahel, located in Algeria's immediate vicinity, Algeria has always chosen a

8 Mamed-zade P. (2017) Bor'ba s terrorizmom i prestupnost'yu stanut prioritetnymi zadachami Afripola [The fight against terrorism and crime will become AFRIPOL's top priorities]// TASS-online. 16 May 2017.

diplomatic path and has avoided any military approach to dealing with an international problem of terrorism. Algeria has also sought to convince the international community to stop the financing of terrorism, including in the form of ransom payments. These efforts were crowned with success in December 2009, when the UN Security Council adopted Resolution No. 1904 prohibiting the payment of ransoms as a supplement to Resolutions 1373 and 1267 on the prevention of the financing of terrorism [Watanabe 2017, p. 141].

The Government of Algeria has played an active role in diplomatic efforts to end the conflict affecting its southern neighbour, Mali. In January 2014, the PDRA initiated multilateral negotiations that lasted a year and a half and concluded with the signing of peace agreements between the government of Mali and the Tuareg «National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad.» The military intervention of France in 2013 and the five-year stay there of the French contingent of troops did not lead to the eradication of terrorist groups and the improvement of security in the region [Kuznetsov 2015, p. 127]. On the contrary, Algeria's border with Mali has become less secure, subject to the pressure from refugees, terrorists, and organized crime.

Algeria has been actively involved for several years in international mediation efforts aimed at a political settlement of the Libyan crisis. The basic principles underlying the DPRA's position are the territorial integrity of Libya, a political dialog between the opposing forces, and non-use of force. A positive factor is the mutual understanding in the Libyan question between Algeria and neighbouring Tunisia. The countries have a common position on the Libyan settlement, favoring a political solution to the Libyan conflicts, while strongly rejecting military options. Both

Algeria and Tunisia support the Libyan Government of National Accord as well as any efforts to find a political solution in the country through a rapprochement between the Libyan parties. Experts in both countries warn that external military intervention in Libya could spark civil wars in neighbouring countries, basing their argument on the inevitable influx of hundreds of thousands of Libyan refugees⁹.

Thus, the external threats and internal challenges that Algeria has faced in recent years have only partially been addressed by its authorities. Relative stability and security at home have the downside of a stagnant political system and dull economy, causing regular surges of social discontent. The government of DPRA is facing the task of diversifying the economy over a short period, however, in the current political environment, large resources are diverted to solving security problems. The impasse between Morocco and Algeria is blocking the establishment of a partnership among North Africa's key political forces, on whom political, economic, and social stability in the region depends. The prospects for the DPRA's regional leadership will become much clearer after the 2019 presidential election, when the new government's main priorities in the field of economy, social sphere, and foreign policy fields will become more obvious.

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