

Algeria

Population: 31.2 million¹

Life expectancy: 70 years

National capital: Algiers

Independence from France: 5 July 1962



Abstract

During the 1990s, Middle Eastern societies have experienced a wave of violent uprisings by Islamic militant groups. Since 1992, Algeria as an integral part of the overall Middle Eastern region, has also become the landmark of military conflict between the state forces and militant Islamist groups. Civil war began across Algeria since the cancellation of the first multi-party national elections by the Algerian military government at the beginning of 1992. It is estimated that since the launch of violence in 1992, more than 60,000 persons have been killed. The motivation for violent conflict is structurally determined and reproduced in line with the opposition of the “traditional middle strata” and “urban poor” against the state intervention in the economy and everyday life in the country. The problems of mass poverty, unemployment, marginalization and alienation among the urban poor, have made it relatively easy for the political elite (the FIS) of the Algerian traditional middle strata to mobilize them into paramilitary groups, such as the AIS and the GIA, against state and security forces.

¹ In the case studies the data on population and life expectancy at birth are estimates from 1999 given by CIA. Also the maps are from CIA (2000).

The Conflict in Algeria

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Agents

Parties involved in the military conflict in Algeria can be illustrated in Table 1:

Acronym	Name	Established	Represents	Affiliation	Support	Conflict with
FIS	Islamic Salvation Front	July 1989	Traditional strata, urban poor, Islamic-clerics and Islamist intellectuals	An umbrella organization for Islamist groups	Iran, Sudan, Islamist Afghan and Lebanese groups	FLN, Algerian government and Army
AIS	Islamic Salvation Army	1992	militant Islamists	associated with FIS	FIS	FLN, Algerian government and Army
GIA	Islamic Armed Group	1992	militant Islamists	associated with FIS	FIS	FLN, Algerian government and Army
FLN	National Liberation Front	1954	nationalist-moderate leftist intellectual	associated with government	The state	FIS, AIS and GIA

The leadership of the FIS is composed of a fourteen-cleric Council. Abassi Madani and Ali Benhadj are the FIS's spokesmen for an invisible committee of Algerian Imams. The spiritual leader of the Algerian Islamic League, Sheikh Ahmed Sahnoun, is considered to be an important figure among the Algerian Islamic-movement (Howe 1992, 96). The FIS has been organized in response to a series of Islamic anti-government riots between October 1988 and late 1989. Serious constitutional reforms began immediately after the riots when in February 1989 the government dominated by the FLN approved a referendum in order to have a new Constitution and to establish a multi-party system in the country. As a result, thirty new political parties including the FIS were formed and queued for official registration, which started in July 1989 (ibid., 94). Furthermore, the first parliamentary elections were organized in December 1991. They resulted in the

narrow victory of the FIS over other competing parties such as the FLN (the party of government), the FFS (Socialist Forces Front, led by Ait Ahmed) (Adamson 1998, 222). The armed struggle between the Islamic militants and the Algerian army and security forces started soon after the cancellation of the elections in 1992 by the state. Consequently, the FIS, feeling dispossessed of its victory in the 1991 national elections, turned to violence. The Islamic militants, by organizing themselves into paramilitary groups such as the AIS and the GIA, aimed at seizing power by military force.

The social basis of the FIS includes traditional middle strata (traditional merchants, shopkeepers, petty-producers, etc.), the urban poor (unemployed masses, daily wage-workers, etc.), radical Islamist intellectuals and Islamic militants with experience of armed conflict in places like Lebanon and Afghanistan (Howe 1992, 96). The FIS can be categorized as a specific type of Islamic populism which is opposed to the social, economic and political policies of the state led by the FLN since Algerian independence in 1962. The notion of Islamic populism can be identified as the political movement of the traditional middle strata that is aimed at mobilizing the urban poor with radical rhetoric against imperialism, foreign capitalism and the political establishment (Abrahamian 1991, 106). It should be mentioned that the radical-sounding class rhetoric of the Islamic populism of the FIS, is only aimed at mobilizing the marginalized urban poor against the Algerian state. In reality, the Islamic populism of the FIS lacks any concrete proposals for land reform, income redistribution and the nationalization of foreign trade. Islamic populism as a form of ideology can be conceptualized as a form of appearance, the formal distortion and displacement of non-ideology. What makes Islamic populism ideological is its articulation, the way it articulates and maintains an appearance, which affects the actual socio-symbolic position of those concerned. That means, Islamic populism is a transformed and elaborated manifestation of the class interests of the traditional middle strata, which is “invisible” for the urban poor who follow it. The political idiom of the FIS is driven from the populist political platform of communal solidarity and national unity, which is aimed at changing the cultural and educational institutions of the state. In this sense, one can identify the Islamic populism of the FIS as representing the politico-economic interests of the traditional middle strata against the interests of the Algerian

ruling secular elite. The cause of the antagonism between the FIS and the state can be conceptualized as the political-class conflict between the traditional middle strata (represented by the FIS) and the military-bureaucratic elite (represented by the state) in Algerian society.

Motivation

Since Algerian accession to independence in 1962, the state² has been following an ambitious program to restructure the economy through a central planning system. The policy of rapid industrialization called “industrializing industries” has become the main aim of the state in its development strategy. The strategy of “industrializing industries” has been based on developing the energy-related industries, petroleum and gas in order to give rise to a series of associated industries both up-stream and down-stream such as iron and steel, metallurgical and mechanical industries and chemicals (Lawless 1984, 161). The rapid rise of an industrialization project has to a large extent enlarged the private industrial sector alongside the public sector which resulted in the rapid enlargement of the new middle-class in the country. However, the rapid rise in the level of investment in the industrial sector has also resulted in the formation of urban poor in the country. The economic crisis of the Algerian industrialization project, which resulted from low productivity, high production costs, the lack of highly-skilled workers, increasing foreign debt, etc., has become a motive force for the civil riots during the 1980s. The economic crisis of Algeria in the 1980s, especially the international decrease in oil and gas prices in 1986 (Brandell 1997, 271), resulted in the rise of a series of civil riots against the one-party system of government. It is estimated that as a result of five days rioting by the urban poor and unemployed youth in October 1988, the state security forces killed five hundred people (Howe 1992, 93).

Apparently, the cause of dissatisfaction that motivated Algerian violence in the 1990s was based on the state’s decision to cancel the elections of 1991, ban the FIS and arrest

² Since its accession to independence, the Algerian state has been dominated by the FLN and its supporters.

its top leaders. However, one has to distinguish between the different levels of dissatisfaction that motivates violence among the social groups who oppose the state. Firstly, on the side of the urban poor mobilized under the umbrella of the FIS, the inability of the state to establish the multi-party system, freedom of expression and the press and especially economic prosperity for the impoverished masses in the country, should be considered as the root causes of conflict. According to Howe, the civil riots of the late 1980s had made it clear that the unemployed youth that make up the absolute majority of the population did not share their parent's residual loyalty to the FLN that led the independence struggle (ibid., 93-94). The urban poor constitute the biggest social group in Algeria as well as in other Middle Eastern countries. The political characteristics and social motivation of this group have not been systematically studied and to a large extent have been ignored by academic scholars. The urban poor are the most marginalized social group and, therefore, the subject of manipulation by the radical intellectuals of other social groups. Therefore, the urban poor are highly capable of becoming involved with the process of violent activities against the state.

Secondly, on the side of the traditional middle strata and the leadership of the FIS, having a place in the decision-making process of the country has to be regarded as an important factor in motivating them towards violence. It is estimated that by 1990, Algeria had an external debt of over 24 billion US Dollars in which service payments were regularly absorbing more than half of all export earnings (ibid., 88). The industrialization project alongside with land reform by the state (during 1971 and 1979) (ibid., 167-177), have created a real economic problem for the traditional middle strata which possessed only limited resources to compete with larger private enterprises in the field of public consumption. For the traditional middle strata having a political organization (FIS) in the state to represent their interests in the country's decision making-process, is the only alternative for them to survive in the country's economic crises.

Instruments

According to the 1977 census of population, it was estimated that 21 per cent of the active population were unemployed in Algeria. Almost nearly half of all the unemployed was under 25 years of age. Estimates suggested that 250,000 to 300,000 young Algerians have been entering the labor market every year to search for jobs by the late 1980s (Lawless 1984, 182-183). Without a doubt, the incidence of civil war, which has been going on since 1992, has increased the number of unemployed young Algerians. The high level of unemployment among Algerian youth has been producing a golden opportunity for the FIS to mobilize them under its organizational framework. For the marginal and unemployed Algerian young men joining a paramilitary organization provides welfare support, socio-political status, integration in a social space, etc. It is within this context that high level unemployment among Algerian youth should be regarded as an important root source of conflict in the country. It should be mentioned that the FIS has been systematically mobilizing its fighters among the urban poor and marginal youth in the shanty-towns.

Due to the fact that the FIS represents the politico-economic interests of the traditional middle strata in Algeria, the party has a strong financial support within Algerian society. Specifically, the term “traditional middle strata” in Algeria is applied to those socio-occupational strata such as guilds, craftsmen, small shopkeepers, wholesalers, exchange agents, brokers and retail merchants as well as a certain number of big businessmen who remained a part of the traditional market system. As mentioned earlier, the FIS depends on the traditional middle strata, both financially and socially. With regard to the problem of transnational involvement in supplying arms to Islamic militants, countries such as Iran, Sudan and paramilitary groups in Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc. were/are suspected of supplying money and arms to the FIS. Wealthy individuals and Islamic cultural and social organizations in the Middle East, can be also considered as the main informal groups in providing the FIS with financial support and a transnational network of communication for getting arms and other military equipment into the region.

The prospect for conflict resolution in Algeria's civil war does not seem to be very promising. On the one hand, the ruling elite of the state does not have a tendency to engage in a process of dialogue with the leadership of the FIS. It should be mentioned that through the policy of land reform, the state has acquired the support of the peasantry in the countryside. Due to the fact that peasants are not a cohesive social group and even fragmented throughout the countryside, it has been difficult for the state to politically mobilize them against Islamic movements. As a result, the mobilization of the peasantry by the state has been realized, firstly, through integrating the surplus population of peasantry into the national army and secondly, through mobilizing the ordinary peasants into paramilitary groups in villages to fight the Islamic armed groups. As a result of the military clashes between the government-backed peasant village guards and Islamic paramilitary groups, many civilians, such as the family of the government-backed village guards, have lost their lives in the countryside.

On the other hand, Islam as the ideological framework of the FIS is not intellectually secularized to be integrated into the modern form of government. Even though, it is not clear which party has been involved in killing the civilians, violence as a means of achieving the end is legitimized by the Algerian Islamic theologians who have the religious duty to interpret religious laws for the masses. As a result, Islamic militant groups have systematically terrorized those Algerian civilians who have supported the government such as government-backed village guards, civil servants and government personnel and/or those civilians such as journalists and academics who have been criticizing the "divine given" principles and approaches of the FIS towards the state and society.

With regard to the roles, which have been played by the international community in the conflict resolution of the civil war in Algeria, the role of the EU, historically speaking, should be considered as crucially important for the Maghreb countries. According to Adamson, the European Union (EU) policy on Algerian affairs since 1972, has tended to reflect the French state's concern with the Maghreb and particularly Algeria. The EU policy on the Maghreb and Algeria, which is termed as *Mediterranean Partner countries*

and *Global Mediterranean Policy*, is currently based on the EU and national state concerns about immigration from the Maghreb countries. Adamson maintains that the concern over immigration control has led the EU and France to encourage economic development in these countries rather than planning for more rigorous border controls (Adamson 1998, 211-212). Furthermore, under the aegis of the *Euro-Mediterranean Policy*, the EU and Maghreb countries held a conference in Barcelona in November 1995 to redefine the nature of their political and economic relationships. According to Adamson, the Barcelona conference was initiated by the EU to address fears about the transfer of the conflict in Algeria to France and the more general rise of Islamic movements within the three countries of the Maghreb (Ibid., 217). In short, since the escalation of violence in Algeria, France and the EU countries have tended to follow a policy of encouragement of democratic values and economic development in Algeria.

However, in order to change the structure of the conflict in Algeria, France and the EU should also begin a specific process of building up a possible channel of communication between the Algerian “military government” and the coalition of the secular-Islamist opposition groups. It is, however, becoming obvious that the ruling elite of the state has to restructure the political system to a more democratic multi-party system in order to save the country from total disintegration. The state must exercise a balancing and arbitrating function between the interests of its own group and those of other groups. Furthermore, the state has to recognize the civil society and establish a genuine welfare system for its impoverished masses. The improvement of the material position of the Algerian urban poor by the secular ruling elite of the state will result in the rapid reduction of the FIS’s popularity among the urban poor.

Sources

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Chronology

- **October 1988.** The start of five days riots in Algeria by the youth, unemployed masses and Islamists and resulted in five hundred deaths.
- **February 1989.** A referendum for a new Constitution to reduce the power of the FLN and establish the right to form political parties which was approved by 73% of 79% of the electorate who voted.
- **June 1990.** Algeria's local elections, the FIS got 54% of the municipal votes, the FLN 28%, the Independents 12%, the RCD (Rassemblement pour la culture et la démocratie) 2.1%, and the centrist PNSD (The Social Democratic Populist Party) in coalition with other parties, 1.6%.
- **December 1991.** The first parliamentary elections in which the opposition parties participated for the first time in Algeria.
- **February 1992.** After the cancellation of the elections, several policemen and soldiers were reported killed in ambushes or shoot-outs with militant Islamist insurgents.
- **July 15, 1992.** A military tribunal sentenced Abassi Madani and Ali Benhaji, the leaders of the FIS, to twelve years, and five others to sentences of four or six years' imprisonment for endangering state security and the national economy.
- **June 2, 1993.** The day of the death of Tahar Djaout, the first journalist killed by the militant Islamists (GIA).
- **September 1994 and January 1995.** Eight political parties and other organizations, including the FLN and the FIS, met in Rome under the aegis of the Sant Egidio community which issued a platform rejecting violence and calling for the replacement of the government by a national conference and national elections. The Algerian government rejected the platform.
- **February 1995.** The main Algerian opposition groups including the FIS signed an agreement called *Pacte National* in Rome. The *Pacte National* aimed at representing both the secular and Islamic opposition groups.
- **1995.** A series of bomb explosions by the GIA in France's Paris Métro.
- **November 1995.** Presidential elections in Algeria in which General Liamine Zeroual was elected President by 62% of the vote out of a total 75% of the electorate.
- **December 1996.** Bomb explosions carried out by the GIA in Paris.
- **1997.** 69 media professionals of whom 58 journalists have been assassinated by the armed Islamist groups.
- **1998.** A mission from the EU countries visited Algeria to study the scale of violence and bloodshed in the country.