
Interview: Abdelhamid Brahimi

Algerians wonder why the West keeps silent

Mr. Brahimi is the former prime minister of Algeria (1984-88) and was a founding member of the National Liberation Front (FLN). He is currently director of the Institute for Maghreb Studies. EIR's Dean Andromidas interviewed him in late January.

EIR: The situation in Algeria has deteriorated considerably in the last month. It appears that Algeria will slide into open civil war even worse than we are seeing now. What is your estimate of the situation?

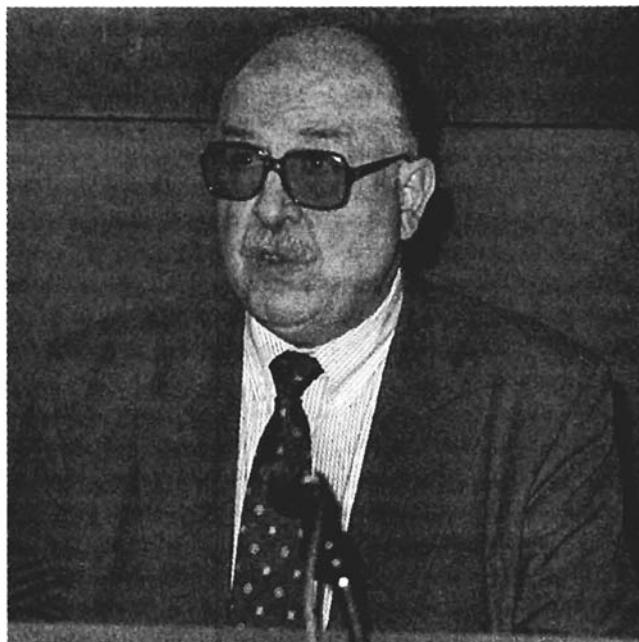
Brahimi: The main question to be asked is, why has the situation continuously deteriorated from a security standpoint for over five years now. Blame is mainly to be laid on the regime, which took the responsibility of carrying out a coup d'état. It then stopped the democratic process and resorted to a dramatically repressive policy, ranging from arrests of civilians upon simple administrative decision, and their imprisonment for years without being judged, to extrajudicial executions of innocent people.

Not only does the regime refuse to hold frank and sincere dialogue with the main representative parties, including the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), but it continues to use force as a means of countering the political ideas and beliefs of people.

It is clear that all the heads of state, and all the ministers named since January 1992, have publicly taken a position for the eradication of the Islamists, falsely comparing them to terrorists, and promising to "terrorize the terrorists." The introduction and spread of terror among the Algerian population, especially those who might support the FIS, comes from a deliberate policy adopted by the authorities.

We must not forget that, since 1992, Algeria has had three heads of state and five prime ministers, and that many ministers are dismissed after only a few months in office, whereas the main military leaders responsible for repression—who are to be found in the highest echelons of the military hierarchy—are still there. The toll has certainly been heavy, since more than 100,000 innocent Algerians have been killed since that time.

This clearly indicates that the present regime does not wish to establish a democratic process, nor accept alternation of power [the opposition coming in], since they reject the popular verdict and the Algerian people's sovereignty. In our opinion, if things continue along this path, the situation can only get worse.



Former Algerian Prime Minister Abdelhamid Brahimi

EIR: Underlying the deteriorating political situation, is the economic crisis and the regime's commitment to implement the policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). How do you see the current economic crisis?

Brahimi: After five years of management by this dictatorial regime, the economic situation has continually deteriorated. What we immediately observe, is a dramatic drop in agricultural and industrial production, as well as in construction and public works. According to statements by the industry minister in August 1996, industrial production has only accomplished 2% of its goals in the first half of 1996.

According to official figures, since 1992, industrial production has regularly declined by more than 10% per year, even dropping by 15% in 1993. Outside of the hydrocarbon field, the state and private industrial sector is functioning at only 20% of its capacity. Production has broken down. Investment rates are the lowest in 30 years. Yet we find that military expenses have greatly increased: from 20% in 1994, to 144% in 1995.

Implementation of the IMF program has had a negative impact. Since 1994, inflation has reached the record level of 40% per year. In 1990, the average Algerian household spent about 65% of its budget on food. Today, even the entire salary is not enough to cover fundamental food needs. Poverty has spread throughout the country, while the middle class is disappearing. I personally know engineers, architects, and doctors who can no longer make ends meet, even when they are helped by friends.

Unemployment has gone up a lot, I have the official figures right here. Since 1995, more than 30% of the population is unemployed, especially younger people and the rural popu-

lation. Some 83% of the unemployed are between 16 and 29 years old. Another striking feature is unemployment among young university graduates. For those who do find jobs, it is only through the intervention of friends or relatives in the administration, or in some other elite position.

In 1992, there were 1.3 million unemployed. In 1996, there were more than 2.5 million, in other words, a twofold increase in four years! And the situation can only get worse, since the IMF program demands getting rid of 400,000 more workers in the public sector, whose companies are to be privatized. Thousands have already been laid off in the last few months alone.

All this shows that it is impossible to have the kind of economic recovery that the government wants, because they are only empty promises. It will also be impossible to get Algeria out of the present rut, given the worsening economic and social situation.

The ruling power, which lacks legitimacy, but wants to improve its political image, is mobilizing the major media to try and prove that the economic situation is going to improve. For that, they point to the oil contracts which the national company Sonatrach has signed with 34 multinational oil companies. They say oil revenues should go up to \$13.5 billion by the year 2003 and that in 2005, oil and gas revenues will have reached \$15 billion. The regime presents this as a diplomatic and financial success for the country.

But, this is not the first time that Algeria has collected such a sum of money. That was especially the case during 1980 and 1984, when oil revenues varied between \$13 and \$14 billion a year. At the time, our population was much less than today. Between 1992 and 2005, when it is promised that our economic problems will be solved with \$15 billion in revenues, the population will have increased by 9 million. It will be impossible for the regime to provide the basic needs of this additional population in food, lodging, schools, hospitals, and especially in job creation, given the fact that in the last five years in office, the economic situation has deteriorated.

We are at a dead end. Therefore, if the regime stays in power until there is a crash, Algeria will be bankrupt well before. My calculations indicate that by 1998-99, the country will be bankrupt.

EIR: Algerian opposition leader Hocine Ait-Ahmed, of the Socialist Forces Front, while denouncing French and European support for the Algiers regime, has called for President Clinton to name a U.S. mediator to deal with the situation. What role do you think the international community and the United States should play in this situation?

Brahimi: First of all, it is useful to bring up something that really strikes Algerians: They do not understand the silence in the United States and Europe about developments in Algeria over the past five years, which have seen elections cancelled, the democratic process stopped, barbaric repression striking innocent people, etc.

I can give you two examples. First, take China: If one Chinese out of a population of 1.2 billion is arrested, there is an uproar in the West—all the Western capitals denounce the violation of human rights. But when, only two hours by plane from major European cities, tens of thousands of innocent people are killed, there is no reaction. This is something nobody in Algeria can understand. Algerians are wondering if they are considered as subhumans.

Conversely, when the National Transitional Council passed a law generalizing use of the Arab language in Algeria two months ago, the European Parliament officially condemned it and asked the Algerian regime to annul this law. So, it is not understandable that when tens of thousands of innocent people are killed, or tortured, or imprisoned without a trial, this is considered normal, but when some kind of cultural law is passed, then, and only then, does Europe intervene. Something is obviously wrong. Not only is silence maintained around the situation in Algeria, but certain Western powers, including France, are lending political and financial support to the Algerian regime.

The recent RAND Corp. report on Algeria by Graham Fuller, in my opinion, is positive, insofar as it says that the accession to power of the FIS is inevitable. But no one in the press reported this. It is positive but insufficient, because it is limited to the RAND Corp.

As for Ait-Ahmed's intervention, I think the very least the American government, and especially President Clinton, should do, is to take a public position on two things: First, condemn the present regime's human rights policy and, more especially, the lack of freedom of speech and political expression; and, second, the Clinton administration should support guaranteeing the conditions for a return to the democratic process in Algeria, through dialogue between the regime and all other representative political parties without exception, which implies the participation of the FIS.

Ait-Ahmed's proposal was rejected, including by countries like France, which said that Algerians should solve their own problems: In other words, let them kill each other. Here, a special remark must be made: In general, almost all of the Algerian people forcefully reject the idea that Algeria is exclusively a French zone of influence, which other powers should stay out of. The position taken last week by the French Foreign Ministry at the Quai d'Orsay on this matter, shows that France is involved in Algeria. Otherwise, why would France have made such a remark in answer to a suggestion by Ait-Ahmed? It presupposes that France is Algeria's guardian, and the Algerian people emphatically do not want any guardian.

Without a sincere and genuine dialogue between the ruling power and the main representative parties, nothing will be solved. This dialogue is necessary to prepare for a democratic transition, to end the bloodshed, and to prepare the future in secure conditions. Without this, the situation will grow worse, and Algeria will sink further into destruction and ruin.