
Interview: Abdelhamid Brahimi

The road to dialogue, peace, and democracy in Algeria

Professor Dr. Abdelhamid Brahimi is a former prime minister of Algeria (1984-88). He resides in London, where he fled following an assassination attempt in Algeria; he is now seeking political asylum in Great Britain. A member of the National Liberation Front (FLN), he served as an officer in the National Liberation Army during the Liberation War of Algeria (1956-62). He has held several positions, including president of Sonatrach Inc. (the American subsidiary of the Algerian national oil and gas company) and minister of planning (1979-84). He is now director general of the London-based Maghreb Center for Islamic Studies, founded recently by himself and other leading Islamic scholars and political figures. He was interviewed on Nov. 23.

EIR: Do the so-called hardliners have enough support within Algeria to succeed?

Brahimi: The current situation in Algeria is very grave and very complex. The Algerian people have been hurt in their dignity since the coup d'état of January 1992: mass and arbitrary arrests of innocent people, including teachers, engineers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, and students; people sent without trial to internment camps or thrown into prison in inhuman conditions of detention. Furthermore, young Algerians are killed every day without any evident reason by death squads, only because they represent a potential danger for the regime.

On the other hand, the hardliners have been attacking for two years the dearest symbols of Algeria, such as: national unity; annulling the law relating to the use of the Arabic language; voicing bitter criticism of the War of Liberation against French colonialism; and justifying by the press the existence of corruption. The putschist generals of the "Party of France," representative of a political class that had become rotten and corrupt, will stop at nothing to maintain their regime, because they are afraid of losing power and their illegitimate privileges in the event the Islamists and nationalists democratically win the legislative elections. They have neither political nor economic programs. Their policy relies on repression. That is why the situation has dramatically deteriorated since the coup of 1992.

The aggravation of social injustice and of the economic crisis; the lack of public freedoms, especially the freedom of expression; and the violation of the fundamental human rights, including the right to life, contributed to increased popular hostility toward the present illegitimate regime. The putschists of the "Party of France" are supported in Algeria by a marginal minority who are democrats on the surface and for show, and who, besides, were all eliminated by the popular verdict during the legislative elections in December 1991. They are isolated from the masses and the credible political parties and are lacking any legitimacy. In such a context, one cannot see by what miracle they would succeed.

EIR: Who is supporting the military from outside Algeria?

Brahimi: It is a tautology to say that the putschists of the "Party of France" are backed by the French government. It is worth recalling that François Mitterrand, the present French President, was minister of the interior in November 1954 when he declared that the only way to negotiate with the FLN was "war by every means," and that Charles Pasqua, the present minister of the interior, was involved in our National Liberation War as a parachutist in the French Army. His special adviser for Algeria now is Jean-Claude Marchiani, a former parachutist who fought against the liberation of Algeria. He is now assisted by the French *pieds noirs*, former active members of the Secret Armed Organization (OAS), famous for its crimes against innocent Algerians and for its destructive activities on the eve of the independence of Algeria in 1962. This French group, at the top of the French administration, is trying to have their revenge and to perform, through the putschist generals in Algeria, the dirty job they could not achieve themselves during our National Liberation War.

That is why the French government is pouring heavy military assistance and very sophisticated arms into Algeria, supporting their partners in the Algerian Army to fight against the Islamists. In fact, the present regime, supported by France, is fighting against the Algerian people for its survival and for the *francophonie* that has now become a new ideology in France, to reconquer lost colonies. Since Nov. 1, 1994,

repression has become more ferocious. Between 400 and 500 innocent Algerians are killed every week, i.e., 1,600 to 2,000 every month. The present regime sought relentlessly to attack Islam, and even its outward manifestations, for example, the firing of female state employees wearing the veil and male employees sporting beards or practicing prayer. Things went even further than this. Mosques were searched, soldiers were even seen trampling the Koran underfoot, dozens of mosques were recently ordered to be demolished. Such hateful and detestable practices are completely foreign to the traditions and customs of Algerians.

EIR: What is the role of France? Is there a consensus within France on an Algerian policy?

Brahimi: Most Algerians today have the impression that what is happening in Algeria is the continuation of the National Liberation War. Everybody in Algeria knows that the putschist generals constitute the extension of France in their country. France has three main objectives toward Algeria. Politically and culturally, France's dream is to bring Algeria back under its influence, to be a member of the *francophonie* club. *Francophonie* has become an ideology, the new substitute for French colonialism. France is trying to strengthen its relations with Algeria (with the present regime, not with the Algerian people) under the cover of the French culture. The French authorities declare themselves tutelar authority on Algeria by saying that they will never accept an Islamic government, even if the Algerian people decide democratically to do so. Their pretentious arguments to justify their interventions in our domestic affairs on any occasion are just inadmissible. They claim that historical links allow them nowadays to be so close to Algeria. But history teaches us that military, political, economic, and cultural repression undertaken by French colonialism for 132 years was bloody, ferocious, and inhuman, and was followed by a savage war against the Algerian people which lasted almost eight years (1954-62).

Such a colonial mentality can never succeed politically. The fact is that the Algerian people are profoundly attached to Islam. Islam has always been actively associated with nationalism in Algeria and has constituted the cement of national unity for the last 12 centuries. The French should admit once and for all that Algeria is different from France in every respect. The Algerians should be left alone to settle their problems democratically, far from any foreign intervention.

Economically, France considers Algeria as a captive market. It is not quite true. Algeria succeeded in diversifying its foreign trade in the 1970s and 1980s, where France came in second place with 17% of Algerian imports and exports. But in the 1990s, France occupies first place, with 34% of Algeria's external trade.

Algeria suffers substantial losses through certain repeti-

tive and juicy operations. This is due to the existence of French networks of interests in the Algerian administration and alongside certain Algerian economic actors which act behind the scenes. Let me cite two examples to illustrate this.

Algeria covers almost all its pharmaceutical needs by importing from France, at prices much higher than those on the world market, medicines which are often past their sell-by date. There were always, in a cyclical fashion, hushed-up scandals in this domain over 1970-94. The loss suffered by Algeria was double. First, extremely large quantities of medicines were obsolete or had to be destroyed; second, the massive importation of cereals from France over the last few years has carried with it an extra cost which may amount to, or even exceed, 30%. The extra cost is the result of the combination of a price higher than that of the world market (absence of competition) and of the very high financial conditions attached to the commercial credits granted to this end.

One can therefore better understand why certain milieux in Algeria and in France are against democracy and openness. For the advent of democracy, and regular changes of government which would follow from it, and the emergence of new, patriotic, honest and competent leaders, would make it possible to put an end to unjustified excess prices and to illegitimate privileges which are to the detriment of the general interest. The French parties, whatever their political affiliations, now have the same position toward Algeria as they did during the first three years of the National Liberation War.

So, as Algerians, we are not looking for any change from France on their Algerian policy. We are only asking for a better understanding of the real and profound origins of Algeria's multiple crisis. The Algerian crisis can be solved only by the Algerians themselves. It is first an Algero-Algerian problem.

EIR: Are the hardliners getting support from neighboring countries such as Morocco or Tunisia?

Brahimi: In Tunisia, many public statements show that the government is strongly supporting the Algerian putschist generals.

Morocco has a more cautious and subtle policy toward Algeria. It is clear from King Hassan's reproaches to President Bendjedid Chadli in 1989 on the creation of the FIS [Islamic Salvation Front] that Morocco does not want to have an Islamic state on its borders. So Morocco will enjoy any situation that contributes to weakening the Islamist movement in Algeria to prevent them from coming to power, even democratically. The Moroccan decision to restore visas with Algeria last summer reveals a high level of coordination between Morocco and France to contain the Islamists in Algeria under an inhuman and ferocious repression, even if there is no direct cooperation between the Moroccan and Algerian governments in this matter.

EIR: The Clinton administration has called for dialogue between the government and the FIS; how do you assess this?

Brahimi: The American position toward Algeria has changed in a positive way in 1994. The public call by the Clinton administration for a dialogue between the Algerian government and all parties including the FIS is very encouraging. The Clinton administration understood the very nature of the Algerian crisis. There is no way to stop the bloodshed and to have civil peace and political stability except by returning to the democratic process through dialogue and consultation.

EIR: How do you assess British policy toward Algeria?

Brahimi: The British policy toward Algeria is very cautious. The British interests with France and Europe are stronger than with Algeria. But I think that the British government could have its own assessment on the Algerian crisis and be more involved politically, economically, and culturally in Algeria and in the whole Maghreb.

Algeria should break out of the political and economic tête-à-tête with France which is damaging our interests. Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United States, and Japan could play a greater role in Algeria and in the Maghreb in the interests of all.

EIR: Some of the press has pointed to the possibility of a U.N. role in the crisis, along the lines of Haiti. Is this being seriously discussed?

Brahimi: It is difficult to believe such rumors. Algeria is not Haiti. The Haitian solution cannot be applied to Algeria. What is needed in the Algerian case is only to leave the Algerians to settle their problems democratically without French intervention in Algerian affairs. French intervention is harmful and very damaging to the Algerian people. Only national dialogue followed by free, genuine, and clean general elections will be able to put an end to the present dramatic situation and to change democratically an illegitimate regime.

EIR: How would you propose getting things on course toward a solution?

Brahimi: I think that it is still possible for Algeria to escape from the current catastrophic situation and avoid the worst. The only way to restore civil peace, stability, and confidence between the governors and the governed, consists of resuming the democratic process.

The overwhelming majority of Algerians desire to choose their President, their MPs, and their government through genuine and clean elections. A crisis which is essentially political requires political solutions. This can arise in three directions:

Measures to restore peace. Some measures need to be taken to restore peace, such as lifting the state of emergency and the curfew, freeing all political prisoners, and repealing

all exceptional legislation that is repressive in character.

Measures to normalize political life. These measures involve guaranteeing a return to respecting the Constitution and its ground rules; assuring public freedoms, including freedom of expression and of access to the media to all without discrimination; and authorizing the FIS to resume its legal political activities. The application of such measures will create a new political climate conducive to dialogue and consultation.

The national dialogue. Only dialogue, consultation, national reconciliation, and tolerance, all of which are favored by the overwhelming majority of Algerians, can get Algeria out of the catastrophic impasse into which it has been led

The national dialogue, without excluding any political party, should create the conditions for the return to the democratic process. Discussion with responsibility, openness, and serenity will facilitate an agreement on a political agenda by fixing a date—the earliest possible—for presidential and legislative elections, by forming a new government to manage the period of transition until the elections, and by accepting the verdict of the people and the principle of regular change of power by the path of democracy and legality.

The advent of democracy, the change in nature of the present political regime, and the emergence of newly elected office-holders of competence and integrity and who are mindful of the general interest, will constitute many serious advantages when it comes to returning to national harmony, reconstruction of the country, and restoring order to the economy and getting it off the ground again.

The democratic alternative is the best guarantee to restore confidence in institutions and in elected office-holders, and to recover social cohesion and political stability.

EIR: The economic crisis has been caused by the collapse in gas prices and a crushing foreign debt. How has this affected the crisis?

Brahimi: Indeed, the fall of oil and gas prices from 1986 onwards hurt Algeria severely and was followed by social disturbances in the large towns such as Algiers, Constantine, Oran, and Sétif. But the view that the drastic reduction in Algeria's external earnings was the only factor between 1986 and 1988 responsible for the political, economic, and social trauma constitutes an inadequate and superficial explanation. Certainly no one can deny the considerable damage done to Algeria by the fall in the prices of oil and gas. In fact, the problem is a profound one and has been gestating for a very long time. The Algerian crisis has not only economic aspects, but political, social, and moral ones as well.

1) The political crisis has its origin in the very nature of the regime. The fact is that the Algerian regime, from 1962 onwards, has been essentially *dirigiste*, statist, arbitrary, and paternalistic, despite the differences of style or method which have characterized the four periods of 1962-65, 1965-78, 1979-91, and 1992-94.

The dominant class has always been arrogant, sole possessor of the truth, excluding all democratic debate.

The insistent monopoly and monologue, the self-satisfaction and opportunism characteristic of the ruling class, all of which led to the collapse of public respect for, and the authority of the state, reached their culmination at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. Algeria could be saved only by an honest and competent government through the democratic process.

2) The social crisis has been aggravated since 1990 by the increase in social inequalities and social tensions, which have been fueled in particular by such factors as inflation and unjust distribution of income and wealth. This has been accompanied by the aggravation of the gap between a wealthy minority (whose fortunes have often been illicitly acquired) and a majority floundering in unemployment, poverty, and destitution. The middle class, which was very significant up until 1986-87 and was the guarantee of social cohesion, began to be eroded and vanished altogether through its impoverishment in 1993-94.

3) The moral crisis contributed also to erode social cohesion. Corruption, embezzlement, illicit enrichment, bureaucratic red tape (often leading to corrupt practices), illegitimate favors (in defiance of the law and justice), nepotism, the accumulation of wealth (not by honest efforts but by fiddles organized by a minority), as well as other forms of injustice, all combined to weaken social cohesion and solidarity and to generate, first, popular indifference and apathy, then popular hostility toward the public authorities, whom ordinary people held responsible for the deterioration of their economic and social conditions.

The FIS fully understood this and quickly capitalized on popular discontent by highlighting Islamic values, notably social justice and the struggle against corruption and poverty.

4) The economic crisis has its origins not only in the fall of oil and gas prices in 1986, but in the nature of the development model adopted by Algeria and implemented from the beginning of the 1970s. This economic model was based on massive industrialization at the expense of agriculture and of public works and construction sectors. The industrial investments represented up to 60% of total investments for a long period of time (1968-80). The intensification of industrial investments led to a growing recourse to the international financial market in view of the scale of the need for capital. The cumulative effect of the debt thus contracted aggravated Algeria's indebtedness within only a few years. The burden of total debt thus rose from \$3.3 billion (29% of GDP) in 1974 to \$16.2 billion (56% of GDP) in 1979. It was multiplied by 4.8 times in six years.

Thus, the constant and growing call on foreign credits was not accompanied by the generation, after the deduction of debt repayment, of a net foreign currency surplus, as was expected, but Algeria was dragged into a process of cumulative indebtedness. The unfavorable international en-

vironment, but above all the failings of the industrial sector, which was not only badly managed but unable to cope with domestic demand, and was characterized by a very low rate of utilization of productive capacity and by a very high marginal coefficient of capital, estimated at 11.2 (meaning that \$1 increase in industrial output requires \$11.2 of additional investment), contributed to this process.

Instead of generating wealth and foreign currency, the industrial public enterprises were becoming an extremely heavy financial burden for the state. Thus, most national corporations were running at a loss. In 1978, the global outstanding debt (internal and external) of public enterprises as a whole was nearly 179 billion dinars (or more than twice the value of GDP, then 86.8 billion dinars) and today it stands at 500 billion dinars.

But after a period of reduction of the real external debt, in which the total debt fell from \$16.2 billion in 1979 to \$12.7 billion in 1984 and stabilized during 1985, the crisis in foreign currency holdings induced by the brutal fall in hydrocarbon prices in 1986 plunged Algeria into the vicious circle of foreign indebtedness. Thus, Algeria's debt increased from this date, following recourse to short-term (6- to 12-month) commercial credits to finance the irreducible minimum of food imports, spare parts, and semi-finished goods normally paid for in cash out of the hydrocarbons receipts. The harshness of the credit conditions and the very curtailed reimbursement periods (6- to 12-months) altered the profile of the foreign debt and helped deliver Algeria up to a cumulative process of indebtedness. All these factors contributed to aggravate the economic crisis in the 1990s: reduction of investments, fall of production of goods and services, growth of shortages, rise in unemployment, and extension of poverty. The government was unable to cope with the increasing economic problems. An increased tension in political life, a growth in insecurity, and economic crisis, social tensions, and corruption all contributed to isolate more and more the rotten present regime.

EIR: Sources point to the possibility of a military coup by nationalist officers willing to share power with the opposition. Is there any truth to this?

Brahimi: The present situation is very grave. Algeria is on the edge of the abyss. Anything could happen. But, I am still convinced that only national dialogue and consultation, and the resumption of the democratic process, can get Algeria out of its catastrophic situation. Only free and genuine elections can allow for the emergence of honest and competent new office-holders, restore civil peace, and provide for lasting stability, necessary not only for the Algerians to rebuild their country in order, fraternity, and solidarity, but for the future of the Maghreb and the Mediterranean region as a whole. If it commits itself to this path, Algeria can overcome its multiple crises and can be a serious partner of Europe, the United States, and other nations.