

# THE CLOCK TOWER SECURITY SERIES



## Southern Watch Series #2 *Algeria's Political Evolution and Implications for Europe*

*By Benjamin P. Nickels*

Participants from Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and the United States gathered online in June 2021 to discuss Algeria's political evolution and its implications for Europe as part of the Southern Watch Series (SWS). The SWS is an ongoing series of virtual conversations surveying current and emerging security challenges in Africa and the Middle East, and their implications for Europe and the United States. It is an initiative of the Marshall Center's European Security Seminar – South. The conversation featured remarks from Dr. Dalia Ghanem of the Malcolm H. Kerr Middle East Center of the Carnegie Endowment and Ms. Tin Hinane El Kadi of Chatham House. These highlights reflect non-attribution takeaways that emerged from group discussion and do not represent the views or positions of any individual panelist or participant.

### ***Adaptive, resilient, and repressive, the Algerian regime is not going anywhere anytime soon.***

Continuity is the watchword of Algerian politics. The regime regularly defies predictions of its imminent collapse. The military retains control and dominates the presidency. There is no political transition to democracy, but rather a succession from one military-backed ruler to the next. Meanwhile, *le pouvoir* – the powers that be – is on a learning curve, better able to calibrate responses to circumstances over time, as shown in its handling of the *hirak*, or popular protest movement. The government variously waits out demonstrations, intervenes and disrupts opposition symbols, makes concessions to public demands, enhances technological surveillance of dissent, and resorts to repression. The regime has built powerful security, police, and intelligence apparatuses, as well as the region's strongest military. The current military is even greater in size and capacity than the army of the 1990s that unleashed devastating violence inside the country in a conflict claiming hundreds of thousands of Algerian lives. At that time, the government prevented democratic elections and jailed thousands in prison camps in the Sahara. Today it burnishes 'democratic' credentials by avoiding crackdowns when elections and referendums garner international attention, but the regime has a proven track record of repression, which it could easily employ again with impunity, especially since the West has little leverage in Algeria and has shown itself favorably disposed toward the regime.

### ***Service to external powers is a regime survival strategy.***

To compensate for a lack of domestic legitimacy, the government signs agreements that provide it status and protection on the international scene. Algiers is fascinated by the defiant strongman posturing of Istanbul. Algeria's economy provides a market (and gateway to Africa) for Turkish businesses and goods, and silence functions as support for Turkey's role in Libya, despite Algerian discomfort with interventionism along its borders. With China, Algiers focuses on trade, knowledge transfer, and coronavirus vaccinations. It extends historic connections based in socialism and the non-aligned movement through participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, likely soon acceding to a multi-billion-dollar loan from Beijing to develop the port of Cherchell. Algeria is the largest purchaser of Russian weapons in Africa. At the same time, Algiers offers itself to the West as a security partner that fights terrorism and blocks Mediterranean migration, recently signing an extradition agreement with Paris and enthusiastically pursuing partnership with NATO. With Europe, Algiers plays on colonial fears of invasion by migrants and colonial hopes that the status quo can be maintained by supporting a decrepit, out-of-touch elite. Fearing a second Arab Spring, European states ignore the *hirak* and tacitly approve Algeria's migrant refoulement at its Southern border. *Le pouvoir* has succeeded in bringing together the major external powers, whatever their differences, in the shared interest of safeguarding the Algerian regime.

### ***The Algerian regime faces insurmountable internal political and economic limitations.***

Algeria's leaders are powerless to establish genuine authority among the Algerian population. Rank-and-file soldiers may enjoy esteem, but the entrenched generals are despised, the military's Revolutionary legitimacy has vanished, and the new president, Abdelmajid Tebboune, is the weakest executive in Algerian history. Government efforts to cast Tebboune as the inheritor of an original anti-corruption 'blessed *hirak*' that removed Abdelaziz Bouteflika from power, while discrediting today's peaceful mass protests as mere factional demonstrations infiltrated by gangs and manipulated by foreigners, have failed to convince the public or boost dismal voter turnout. The regime also has no conception of an economy outside of oil and gas. Because trade deals are contracted for diplomatic support, they are economically barren. Lopsided bilateral agreements allow resource extraction with no value added in country. China and Italy, a major importer of Algerian gas, have done virtually nothing to encourage Algerian industry. Paltry French investments in petrochemical plants and automobile assembly work have, for all of France's concern about migration, created very few jobs for Algerians. Algiers squandered huge oil profits on unproductive arms purchases rather than making investments that could have put youth to work, attracted foreign direct investment, and generated a sustainable economy. With no vision and no political or economic legitimacy, the Algerian regime will likely rely increasingly on brute force implemented by specialized police and intelligence forces, an approach that can nonetheless keep illegitimate rulers in place for decades.

### ***A reckoning can be delayed but not avoided in Algeria.***

Algeria is on a collision course. No matter how well it learns, *le pouvoir* will weaken over time. Clinging to a status quo that is already slipping away, the regime is fundamentally obsolete, irrelevant, and unable to address the actual concerns of the Algerian people. The foreign reserves have lost roughly 80% of their value in recent years. Algeria's oil and natural gas resources, already reduced in market value since 2014, may be depleted within the next 20 years, not

leaving enough even for the country's own use. Meanwhile, Algeria is not cultivating the knowhow necessary to extract and refine its considerable shale gas resources or to otherwise transform its economy and society, in part because the regime fears an educated citizenry. *Le pouvoir* prefers to keep the people in semi-ignorance, even if that means ordinary Algerians – almost a third of whom are under age 15 – grow up with ‘nothing to do’ and ‘nothing to lose,’ a recipe for popular unrest. Every year Algeria falls further behind neighbors like Egypt and Morocco, which are opening new trade corridors and gaining in economic strength, gradually advancing their geostrategic position. Rabat is outperforming Algiers in coronavirus vaccinations, trade agreements yielding concrete economic benefits, and diplomacy in the Sahel and West Africa, where Algerian influence is waning. Ever more embattled, the regime may resort to violence, but the costs of retaining power through force will go up. Simply jailing or killing protesters is not an effective long-term strategy for precluding change. Inflection points like elections will likely become more disruptive. The regime may hold on for years, even decades, but eventually it will reach a breaking point.

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### ***About the Author***

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