

28<sup>th</sup> August 2013

## **After the Arab Spring:**

### **Algeria's Standing in a New World**

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*Global Governance, Issue 3, No. 3.*

Algeria has the potential to emerge from the Arab Spring as a regional power. This may be good news for western states, but it's bad news for Arab revolutionaries

In the context of the Arab Spring, or Arab Winter, much attention has been paid to those states seen to be exerting influence from behind the scenes. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are using their immense wealth to promote conservative Sunni factions; Iran, along with Hezbollah, is supporting fellow Shia's; and the US, rather than supporting liberal secular forces, is sticking by its realist principles and backing whoever it thinks will come out on top.

But very little attention has been devoted to a large and populous country that could emerge from events as a key regional power. Algeria is one of the few countries that has remained, in the main, largely unaffected by the Arab Spring. Early protests withered away when the regime made it clear it was not about to cave in to protester demands and the Algerian public had no appetite for confrontation since they were still convalescing from years of brutal civil war.

Nevertheless, the dictatorial regime in Algeria remains deeply concerned about events in the region and is actively seeking to prevent further challenges to fellow dictatorial regimes.

As the uprising in Libya progressed, Algeria, much to the dismay of people in North Africa, defended the Ghaddafi regime, refused to recognise the National Transitional Council (NTC), and opposed NATO intervention. It was even accused of providing military support to the regime.

Algeria was not only concerned about a popular revolution in neighbouring Libya setting a precedent, it feared regime change in Libya would create instability in the Maghrib and the Sahel, resulting in further tribal secession demands and a boost to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM). On this point, at least, Algerian fears were vindicated by subsequent events.

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Algeria has also taken a similar stance towards the uprising in Syria. Since at least September last year, and possibly much earlier, Algeria has been working very closely with Iran, a long-time ally, to support the ailing Assad regime. Iran and Algeria were the only two countries to object to the suspension of Syria from the OIC, at a meeting in Saudi Arabia last year. More recently, Algeria, along with Lebanon and Iraq, opposed an Arab League decision to support Arab states that armed opposition groups in Syria.

There is no evidence that Algeria is providing any military support to the Assad regime, but unconfirmed rumours do claim that Algerian military aircraft are landing in Syria every few days. Such a development, if confirmed, would not come as a major surprise since Algeria does have the largest defence budget in Africa (\$10.3 billion) and is a strong military power with projection capabilities.

Along with Iran and Russia, Algeria does not want to see the end of the Assad regime. It fears the domino effect could visit it next, and success for the uprising in Syria would only embolden local dissidents and jihadist factions. Furthermore, with the support of Algeria, Iran and Russia, Assad, especially in the absence of external intervention, may just hang on to power.

Regardless of Algeria's support for Assad and its alliance with Iran, the North African state has also managed to use the Arab Spring to improve its relationship with the US and UK. With Libya, Tunisia and Egypt still struggling to get back on their feet, the secular dictatorship in Algeria, perhaps the last in the region, has emerged as a highly reliable and important counter-terrorism and trade partner.

Both David Cameron and Hillary Clinton have paid visits to the country in recent months in order to strengthen ties. Events in Mali and the seizure of an oil facility in southern Algeria by jihadist factions have only served to reinforce the importance of having a strategic alliance with this highly capable and relatively wealthy state.

This development, however, highlights an interesting dilemma. Western powers may vocalise support for democratic movements, secularism, liberalism and human rights but their strategic and economic interests are best served by regimes that are stable, and in the MENA region that tends to be dictatorships.

Algeria has the potential to emerge from the Arab Spring as a regional power. It has a well-

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equipped military with counter-terrorism expertise, large energy reserves, a growing economy, and, more importantly, it is stable. This may be good news for western states concerned about the rise of jihadist groups in the region and trade, but it is bad news for Arab revolutionaries.

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Please cite this article as:

Hussain, G. (2013) 'After the Arab Spring: Algeria's Standing in a New World'. Human Security Centre, Global Governance, Issue 3, No. 3.