

ALGERIA, OR OPPORTUNISTIC TERRORISM

*By Claude MONIQUET,
President of ESISC*

The return of terror to Algeria proves to what extent Islamic terrorism can show itself to be opportunistic and how it intends to exploit the weaknesses – real or imagined – of the ‘*impious regimes*’ that it is fighting. Because **although spectacular attacks have returned to center stage, this is certainly as much related to a domestic and purely national agenda as it is to any desire to fit into a global strategy.**

We do not have to prove at length the existence of this global strategy. We have underscored here enough the fact that the establishment of a third area of Jihad – following Afghanistan and Iraq – and one that is above all so close to Europe (and thus apt to threaten us directly) would represent an interest for the al-Qaeda sphere of influence.

But Algeria was not chosen by chance and ‘*al-Qaeda in the Islamic States of the Maghreb*’ (AQIM) is a misnomer and would be better named ***al-Qaeda in Algeria***, because this is **certainly the country today which is the weak security link in the Maghreb.**

To be sure, tomorrow the bombs can explode in Morocco or in Tunisia, but that will change nothing in reality: even though the Islamist contagion and Jihad influence have grown in these two countries, one, Morocco, is engaged in democratic and economic reforms which are modifying profoundly its appearance, and the other, Tunisia, has succeeded with its economic bets on development while controlling as perfectly as possible the security sphere. As for Mauritania and Libya, it would not be an insult to consider that their destabilization would have little influence on the region since their positions are marginal in terms of population, politics and even economics. The situation is quite different with Algeria, which is an enormous exporter of gas and oil and has a population of 32 million inhabitants.

Alas, **Algeria in 2007 strongly resembles Algeria at the start of the 1990s:** stuck in a social crisis without end – an indefensible paradox: being one of the richest countries in Africa, Algeria today leaves its population to survive in lamentable conditions – and has a very great tendency to lay the blame for all the faults on its colonial past which prevented it from developing. If you consider that the country has been independent for more than 45 years and that the great majority of its citizens have never known this accursed period, there would be cause to laugh if it were not tragic.

The worst, certainly – and the most promising thing for the Islamists – is that the powers that be are de facto on leave. One is revealing no state secret in saying that the health of President Bouteflika leaves much to be desired, which explains his numerous absences, in all the meanings of this term. The *Caliph*, pardon me, the President reigns but certainly de fact he no longer rules. Or he does so very little. The way power is structured in Algiers, the clans which surround the Presidency – the senior military hierarchy, the FLN and the petroleum technocrats, to name just three, though one could also bring up the ‘*pro-French*,’ the ‘*pro-Americans*’ and even now the ‘*pro-Russians*’ grouped around the Minister of Interior, Mr Yazid Zerhouni, a great admirer of Vladimir Putin and his model of a strong State – have been torn apart for months while looking for a possible successor. All in vain.

The same clans, feeling the ground falling away under their feet, have a tendency to devote much more energy on the search or on maintaining their safe bases, most often in the 16th Arrondissement of Paris... - which could turn out to be vital for their survival in case things

really take a bad turn. The result is that considerable energy is lost in factional negotiations and in behind the scenes arrangements. One also notes that the **Islamic sphere has so well understood that President Bouteflika is, perhaps, the last keystone of a system that has been undermined that on September 6 it did not hesitate to try and go after the President himself** in an attack that turned into a bloodbath (more than twenty deaths and 107 injured) at Batna. The calculation is clear: 'let's try to hasten the arrival of the historic moment which will see the regime totally destabilized and more weakened than ever.'

During this time, the country has been left either ungoverned or very little governed. One of the many proofs of this is the fact that no successor has been named to replace General Smaïn Lamari, who died on August 27 and who, in his capacity as the number two man in the Department of Security and Intelligence, occupied a central position in the struggle against terrorism.

Nature hates vacuums. And the Islamist sphere of influence has understood very well that by concentrating its energy to strike now, with blows of redoubled force, it may profit from this historic moment and amplify the crisis. What would happen if, for example, tomorrow some expatriates, preferably French, were kidnapped and murdered before the cameras, in the Iraqi fashion? Everyone knows the answer to this question.

Given its own importance and its prominence as energy supplier, if Algeria topples in a new crisis such as bloodied it during the 1990s, all the Maghreb will tremble and Europe will feel the repercussions hard. For this reason at least, we should assist Algiers – as we should comfort Rabat and Tunis – to get past this dangerous period and recover the stability that has been threatened. We should remain calm, stay in Algeria, of course, but also make certain that those in power in Algiers understand that it is up to them to retake the initiative.

Not just by repression, indispensable by the way, but also by intelligent and necessary reforms. The kind of reforms the country has been awaiting for more than twenty years.

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