
Interview: Rabah Kebir

'It is time to tell the Algerian government to stop the violence'

While in Paris for the D-Day celebrations, President Bill Clinton announced that his administration distinguishes between "mainstream Islam" and terrorists operating under Islamic labels, and that it was opening relations with the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria. EIR spoke to Rabah Kebir, spokesman for the FIS abroad, in early July.

EIR: How do you characterize the current situation in Algeria?

Kebir: The situation in Algeria today is very far gone, first of all on the political plane, because there has been no progress. Although the current government talks of dialogue, it has not taken steps in that direction. It is still practicing violence, and in a terrible fashion. For the first time Algerians are seeing this kind of violence. For example, the police come into the villages and take citizens who are so-called "close to the mujahedeen," and execute them in front of the people, in broad daylight. They have repeated this several times. It's the concretization of the policy of the former head of government, who said that the "relationship of fear" had to be reversed. Although the Malek government was replaced, the policy continues, which means that Mr. Zeroul is either not master of the situation, or that he is not sincere [about dialogue]. We are witnessing things that did not occur even in the colonial occupation period.

EIR: Why is this happening?

Kebir: It's a kind of revenge. They come into a city, and tell the people, if a policeman dies in the city, we will kill ten inhabitants of the city. It's an attempt to drive a wedge between the people and the mujahedeen, but it will not work, because the victims are simple citizens, not terrorists. So the situation from this point of view is very deteriorated.

EIR: And from the economic point of view? What has the effect been of the agreement reached between the government and the International Monetary Fund?

Kebir: This policy cannot work. We are opposed to the agreement with the IMF. We've talked about this subject with the Americans, and with others. We said, we're against it. They have a different point of view. For us, the effect of the IMF deal will be to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. The rescheduling will give the government a couple

of billion dollars, but they cannot use the funds to help develop the country, to do something for the welfare of the people. So the economic situation is worse than before.

EIR: Considering the amount, compared to the \$9 billion annual debt service bill, it looks as though Algeria is gaining nothing.

Kebir: The money will go in one pocket and out the other. It's important to see that the political solution to the crisis is inextricably linked to the economic solution. They are the same thing. If a political solution is not found, there will never be an economic solution.

EIR: Those who organized the rescheduling did so in hopes it would stabilize the situation. But the IMF conditions—devaluation, internal interest rate hikes, import cuts—have only aggravated the social conflict.

Kebir: Because of this, prices have soared. We have issued a document on the IMF deal and on the Algerian economy, which should be available in English in a couple of weeks.

EIR: Do you have your own economic program?

Kebir: We have a political program, which gives the broad outlines of economic policy. We have a special commission of economists who are working on the program.

EIR: How do you see the Clinton administration's opening up contact with the FIS?

Kebir: We view the new position of the Americans as very positive. It was a change that was necessary, in order to have relations based on respect for the Algerian people. It is time to tell the Algerian government to stop the violence—which is what the Americans said—and make clear, that it's time to return to dialogue, to seek a political solution. The Algerian government says one thing, but then its deeds contradict it.

We had contact with the Americans before Clinton made his statement. We talked about the same issues we have just been discussing here—the IMF. And, unfortunately, we did not have the same point of view. They say: The rescheduling is in your own interests, in the interests of the FIS. The population does not accept rising prices, which creates more problems for the government. They say: It is necessary for Algeria to be a part of the international economy. We say:

The Clinton administration decided: We are convinced that the Islamic Salvation Front is a political reality in the country, and that nothing can happen in Algeria without the FIS. They reached this conclusion, and as a result tried to establish contact with us.

That's not the case; the IMF policy is not in the interests of the people, and—there you have it—we took note of the fact that there are diverging viewpoints on this matter. But, on the other hand, the political aspects, above all the need for a sincere dialogue with the FIS, this was clear, this is a point we held in common. Because if there is not a serious dialogue with the FIS, as a political party, with its historical leadership, and if there is not the opportunity for internal dialogue within the FIS, among its cadres, to reach clarity, then the situation will worsen by the day, and the most extremist elements will gain control of the situation.

EIR: Can you say something more about the talks with the Americans?

Kebir: As I said, there was a divergence on economic policy. They said it would be in our interest in the long run, considering membership in the Club of Paris and so on. And that's the point on which we differ.

EIR: What did you propose?

Kebir: We said: We do not accept the rescheduling package. We accept cooperation between states. The rescheduling deal is against our interests because Algeria has already paid out [in debt service] more than the total amount of its foreign debt. It is impossible to continue to follow such a policy. We have specialists who are studying radical measures.

EIR: Did you propose a debt moratorium?

Kebir: We did not get to that stage. We discussed the idea of having talks with our economists, to find a radical solution.

EIR: How long have you had contact with the Clinton administration?

Kebir: Since December.

EIR: Did they seek out contact with you?

Kebir: Yes.

EIR: Why do you think they decided to do so?

Kebir: They said: We are convinced that the FIS is a political reality in the country, and that nothing can happen in Algeria without the FIS. They reached this conclusion, and as a result tried to establish contact with the FIS.

EIR: Are you unanimously in favor of contact with Washington, inside the FIS, or is there opposition?

Kebir: With the politicians, there is no problem. They see that the Americans, and others, for that matter, have a pro-FIS position. Certainly, it was said: You Americans had positions previously which were unacceptable, you supported the dictatorship in one way or another. They tried to deny it, saying, no that's not true. We showed them then, that on a certain date, Mr. So-and-so said such and such. One official replied that if Mr. So-and-so said that, it must have been his "personal opinion." But, in spite of this, they apologized. So, therefore, clearly, there is a serious change that has taken place.

EIR: Did the Americans define conditions or parameters for the dialogue?

Kebir: For the moment, no. For the moment, the basis of the discussions are the five conditions issued in December.

EIR: Of the FIS?

Kebir: Yes, that's the basis. Because it was after that press conference [in Bonn] that the Americans asked for contact. They encouraged the idea of dialogue. At the same time, they raised questions about how one could concretize the dialogue, given that one of the five conditions, was that those responsible for murder in Algeria had to be brought before a court. They did not say something different, but they said they thought this condition was a sort of rejection of dialogue, because it is not easy to demand that those responsible for murder in Algeria be put on trial and judged. That condition they considered very hard. On the other hand, that was at the first meetings. I feel that they are looking for a serious and feasible dialogue. Which means, they are not out to pose conditions that block dialogue.

EIR: What are the other considerations?

Kebir: The Americans insist as always on the question of human rights. For our part, we gave our assurances on this point, and for the future. We explained that we, the FIS, have no problem whatsoever with this. We gave them all guarantees. The other thing, regarding freedoms in general—political freedom, individual freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, etc.—we have no problems with

this. For our part, we told them, these freedoms are guaranteed. They received this quite well, and they saw that the FIS, with this commitment, can be a valid interlocutor. So, when at a certain moment, a French minister said that the FIS was a terrorist organization, the Americans replied, no, that's not true, the FIS is not. They had already had contacts and they knew a bit about the views of the FIS on certain issues. This does not mean that the French don't know the same; they know it very well, but the French want to demonize us.

EIR: What is the French position now vis-à-vis the FIS?

Kebir: I think the French problem is domestic, it is not a question of foreign policy. I mean, there is the problem of the presidential elections [in 1995] and that plays an important role. In my opinion, their view of Algeria is quite similar to the Americans'. In their reports to the Americans, the French say that the Algerian government will fall in the coming months, that it's not durable. But at the same time, they say that this government has to be supported. It's contradictory. According to well-informed sources in France, the right wing is trying to have a clear, fixed line up to the elections, and the line is support for the current Algerian government. This is for electoral reasons. I think that the French are anti-Islamist. At a certain level, there are contacts with the French. We know that the French are convinced that the Algerian regime will fall, and that the FIS is an absolutely strong, clearly defined reality in Algeria, but from the point of view of the press, and in statements by the foreign and interior ministers, they are all anti-Islamists. This is a matter of playing the French electorate.

EIR: How do you see the situation with Germany?

Kebir: Germany . . . Germany is always Germany. I don't know. The Germans receive pressures from the Algerian government. The Germans support the regime, and thus place themselves against democracy, and against the people. Up to now, no German official has tried to talk to us, to meet, contrary to what others in Europe have been doing. The German position is not normal, we don't understand it.

EIR: What about Italy?

Kebir: Certainly, the Italians, as well as the Spanish, want contact. It's just the Germans who don't.

EIR: And the British?

Kebir: The British, no, perhaps because they have limited relations with Algeria. The British have assumed an anti-Islamist position.

EIR: What does the dialogue with America mean for the perspectives of your relations inside Algeria?

Kebir: If the Algerian government wants a negotiated solution, which even foreign countries have been pushing, then pressure has to be put on the Algerian government to free

the historical leaders of the FIS, among them Abdelkader Hachani, the head of the provisional executive office of the FIS, who has been in prison since January 1992. He is in a serious situation, he doesn't even have the right to go outside into the courtyard, he's in total isolation, it's a catastrophe. If the Algerian government frees these men, and if the FIS is given the opportunity to meet and have discussions, then I think, despite the gravity of the situation, that a solution is possible. Without this, things will get worse day by day. The government will never be able to master the situation.

EIR: Have you, as a Muslim force, taken any initiatives regarding the U.N. conference on population slated to take place in Cairo in September? The conference program calls for massive depopulation in the developing sector, and a one-worldist government.

Kebir: This is old hat for us. The Islamic movement has taken a clear position against birth control long ago. The FIS is against birth control completely, and is conscious of the seriousness of the issue. The only family planning we allow is what a man and his wife, on an individual basis, do. It is a personal question. But as for a birth control policy, that is unacceptable. In other words, family planning is all right, but limiting births is not. A man and his wife may decide to have two or three children, for now, for the moment. They may decide the number of children they want to have within a certain period of time, and then, later, decide to have more. This is a matter of organizing the family, economically, and so on. But if it is said that each family is allowed to have only one child, no, that is forbidden by Islam.

EIR: Some malthusian lobbyists have tried to use the case of Iran, which has introduced birth control measures, to say that Islam allows this. There is talk of revising the Hadith to eliminate contradictions with birth control.

Kebir: I don't think that's so. The Hadith are the sayings of the Prophet; one can't tamper with them, or with the Quran. Maybe the Shi'ites in Iran see it differently, but in the Sunni world, that's impossible. My wife and I have five children, and the sixth is on the way, God willing!

EIR: How do you evaluate developments in Yemen?

Kebir: Yemen had elections, had a constitution, and with the results of the elections, it legally and democratically chose a solution. What [southern secessionist leader] al Baidh did was the result of outside forces, who wanted to manipulate the situation in the country. I do not think al Baidh would have dared do what he did without foreign help. There had been war before between the north and south, there had been the unification under the north. The press talks about the "north" and the "south" but the "north" is actually the legal government, chosen through elections. I think the situation is on its way to being stabilized, God willing.