

Fight over Algeria policy is on the international agenda

by Dean Andromidas and Hussein al-Nadeem

The June 17 issue of the leading Arabic daily *Al-Hayat* quoted an unnamed U.S. State Department official saying that "the administration sees no problem in the election of an Islamic government by the Algerian people." Although largely unreported in the western press, the statement is the strongest yet demonstrating the Clinton administration's commitment to supporting a peaceful solution to ending the civil war conditions that have engulfed Algeria for the last three years. For the past year, the Clinton administration has been in a dialogue with the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and other opposition groups in an effort to end the violence which began when the Army-backed Algerian regime cancelled planned elections and banned the FIS after the opposition party demonstrated that it could win the national elections.

For the past year, the Clinton administration's efforts were opposed by Algeria's former colonial master, France. The French government led by Prime Minister Edouard Balladur and Interior Minister Charles Pasqua had been the leading sponsors of the Algerian regime, in conformity with the Paris government's pro-British policy aimed at sabotaging Clinton's foreign policy initiative and maintaining a controlling interest in its former colony. The recent election of Jacques Chirac to the French Presidency has led to speculation that a breakthrough could be made to end the civil war in Algeria. Chirac's appointment of Alain Juppé as prime minister was seen as a hopeful sign, since Juppé, the foreign minister in the Balladur government, had been much closer to the U.S. position.

Nonetheless, informed Algerian opposition sources caution against expecting a dramatic shift on the part of France and the hard-liners in the Algerian regime. These sources told *EIR* that it would take several months for Chirac and Juppé to shift French policy in the face of the strongly entrenched forces within the security services and business and political communities in France.

This assessment has been supported by the recent decision of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its satellites to extend huge loans to the Algerian regime, which is presently involved in a country-wide mass killing campaign against its own population. On April 7, the Algerian Central Bank and the creditor banks of the so-called Paris Club agreed in London to reschedule \$4.5 billion of Algerian commercial debt. The agreement came at the same time that Algerian

Foreign Minister Salih Dembri was invited to Chatham House (the Royal Institute for International Affairs). While in London, Dembri announced that his government would sign another deal with the IMF, which would enable it to reschedule its \$26 billion in foreign debt and reform its civil war-torn economy.

Saudi Arabia, which has had tense diplomatic relations with Algeria because of the latter's neutrality during the Gulf war in 1991, rescheduled \$500 million in Algerian debt to Saudi banks on April 17. And on May 12, the London Club signed an agreement with the Algerian Central Bank rescheduling another \$4.5 billion in commercial debt. The agreement gives the Algerian government 15 years' breathing room to pay its debt, which was due in 1994-97. (The London Club consists of Chase Manhattan Bank, the Arab Banking Foundation, Sakura Bank, the French-Arab Banking Association, and the Long Term Bank of Japan.) The group is currently headed by the French Société Générale. The European Union has also extended a \$200 million credit. France has been seen as the leading sponsor of these moves. IMF Managing Director Michel Camdessus, a Frenchman who publicly praised Algeria as a "model" for the Third World, has been criticized by the Clinton administration for his lack of impartiality in his support for an Algeria debt bailout.

More ominous is the fact that Algeria just concluded the purchase of 700 "Scorpion" light tanks from Turkey. The Scorpion is a British-designed tank manufactured under license in Turkey and is ideal for counterinsurgency operations. Despite Algeria's disastrous financial situation, the IMF apparently voiced no criticism of this deal which cost several hundred million dollars.

A new Clinton initiative

In an apparent attempt to distance Washington from these developments, the U.S. ambassador in Algiers told a group of editors of leading opposition newspapers, including that of the FIS, that it supports a policy of dialogue among all the parties who denounce violence, and that "those who understand the latest support by the International Monetary Fund to Algeria as U.S. support, are misguided." The ambassador elaborated that "democracy is not a slogan, but a practice, and without the participation of all the parties in finding a political solution for the struggle in the country, the U.S.

policy will remain unchanged and will continue to call for a peaceful solution for the crisis." The ambassador said that "political unrest in the Maghreb region affects American interests in the Middle East the same way as it does to neighboring countries."

One week later, *Al-Hayat* quoted an unnamed State Department official saying that the Clinton administration "is encouraging the Algerian government to engage in a dialogue with the opposition parties, and that the Sant'Egidio would be a good starting point for the dialogue." Also known as the "National Pact," Sant'Egidio is the agreement of the eight leading opposition parties, including the FIS, drafted in Rome last January, which calls on the government to form a transition government with all leading parties for the purpose of organizing fresh elections. This official said that the "administration sees no problem in the election of an Islamic government by the Algerian people." He revealed that Hussein Ayet Ahmed, secretary general of the Front of Socialist Forces, a member of Sant'Egidio, in a recent visit to Washington, met with State Department and White House officials and was asked to urge the FIS to make an official statement denouncing terrorism and violence as a condition for opening official relations with Washington. He said that although the "administration makes a clear distinction between religious fanaticism and Islam," the FIS has given contradictory and unclear signals. The FIS problem "is that there are many factions inside the front that the leadership cannot control, but this does not mean that it is not responsible for violence in the country," he said.

This drew an immediate response from Rabah Kebir, the senior FIS spokesman based in Germany. He confirmed that discussions with Washington have been ongoing, and stated that "on many occasions we expressed our rejection and denunciation of any act that targets civilians, Algerians and non-Algerians, and we declared our rejection of any act that goes against Islamic law." Kebir distanced the FIS from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which has taken responsibility for numerous terrorist acts and is believed to be deeply penetrated, if not controlled by the Algerian secret services. "We have called on the leaders of the GIA, and still do, to denounce the crimes attributed to them or committed under their name. We also ask them to withdraw all the declarations and decrees they issued against us, which contain clear violations of Islamic *Shari'a*, otherwise it will be held responsible for these acts before Allah and before the nation and history."

Shifts inside Algeria

The coming to power of Chirac in France and increased U.S. pressure have led the Algerian regime to begin secret negotiations with FIS leaders including Abassi Madani and Ali Belhadj, who have been held in prison since the FIS was banned in 1995, as well as Ali Djeddi and Abdel Boukhamkem, who were released from prison last year. The government also allowed the National Pact to hold a public meeting

in Algiers, which drew 10,000 people, mostly FIS supporters. But the government refused to allow FIS leaders Djeddi and Boukhamkem to attend that meeting.

While fighting between militants and government forces continues, with up to 1,000 casualties a week, the government is seeking to hold presidential elections in a desperate attempt to gain international legitimacy. The National Pact refuses to support these elections and continues to demand the formation of a transitional government comprising all the leading opposition parties for the purpose of organizing new national elections.

In this context, President Liaman Zeroual recently proposed that Dr. Ahmed Talik Al-Ibrahimi, foreign minister in 1982-86, become the presidential candidate. Al-Ibrahimi is a highly respected member of the National Liberation Front which led the struggle for liberation from France in the 1960s and ruled the country until 1992. His leadership would be acceptable to the National Pact, including the FIS, and important factions in the military. But, one leading opposition figure and former colleague of Ibrahimi said, he would be acceptable only as leading a transitional government, not as a presidential candidate. This source pointed out that it is still not clear whether the regime is "maneuvering" under international pressure or is interested in serious negotiations.

Nonetheless, the government is expected to announce on July 5, Algeria's national day, whether it will proceed with elections despite the opposition of the National Pact, or release FIS leaders Madani and Belhadj.

Faction fight in France

On June 20, over 400 French police and secret service officers arrested 25 people in Paris, Marseilles, and other locations, who authorities claim are members of FIS, GIA, and the Tunisian Islamic Front. The operation was conducted under the order of two anti-terrorist judges and was a continuation of an investigation begun by the Balladur government under the direction of Pasqua. The move delighted the Algerian government but, according to some sources, reflects the ongoing faction fight over Algerian policy.

"Pasqua still controls considerable influence in the security services," one source told *EIR*. A powerful figure in the French secret services over the last 30 years, Pasqua is fundamentally extremely anti-American, although he is believed to have links to the Iran-Contra circles of George Bush. This source pointed out that the Islamic policy in the French bureaucracy, particularly the secret services, is strongly influenced by elements of the Secret Army Organization's cadres. The later was the colonialist faction that opposed giving independence to Algeria and organized several assassination attempts against President Charles de Gaulle. "These are the people who tried to crush the Algerian liberation movement; now they are heads of leading departments in the security services and bureaucracy," the source said.