

## The United States and Algeria: The Cautious Road to Partnership <sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

In contrast to the United States' relations with neighboring Morocco and Tunisia, those with Algeria are quite complex. Although US-Algeria relations have never reached the level of hostility that characterized US dealings with Libya until recently, they have been antagonistic from Algerian independence in 1962 until the past decade. Some of the guarded differences in the views of the United States and Algeria are explained by the determinants of Algerian foreign policy, which is shaped by the regional geopolitical context; the country's historical experience, mainly the national liberation war (1954-1962);<sup>2</sup> ideological imperatives; and the economic choices imposed by postcolonial conditions. There is also the fact that Algeria continues to oppose what it perceives as the United States' global hegemonic aims.

Good or bad, relations between Algeria and other countries are determined by their position vis-à-vis these determinants, as well as Algerian decision-makers' perceptions of the intentions and actions of individual states. Thus, cooperation or conflict with a foreign country will depend on its position on issues that Algerian officials consider important or unimportant to their country's national interest. Another factor that remains relatively constant in Algerian foreign policy relates to the type of ties, close or more neutral, that a given country has with Morocco, whose interests are perceived as hostile to those of Algeria. The close relationship that the United States has maintained with Morocco also helps explain the lack of closer ties between Algeria and the United States. Problems between the two countries have been exacerbated as a result of the role that Algeria believed the United States played during the 1963 Algerian-Moroccan conflict ("War of the Sands"). Algerian decision-makers perceive the special relationship between Morocco and the United States (as well as those of the Kingdom of Morocco with France) as a threat to their own interests. Since the 1990s, this situation has led the United States to seek a

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rather difficult balance in its relations with the two North African rivals, even as Morocco remains its key ally in the Maghreb.

### **The principles of Algerian foreign policy: the inevitable conflict with US foreign policy**

In the 1990s, some observers correctly distinguished a new pragmatism in Algeria's foreign policy. This pragmatism has not reduced the importance of other determinants of Algerian diplomacy, however, the most important of which relates to the national liberation war experience, which had a considerable impact on the orientation and conduct of Algerian foreign policy. Several permanent features (national sovereignty, territorial integrity, economic nationalism, support for Third World liberation movements and positive nonalignment) have shaped Algeria's regional and international policies. These factors have led Algerian decision-makers to attempt to reshape the economic and external security environment. As a result, Algeria, which has developed very influential and effective diplomacy, has not only attempted to reshape international economic and political relations but also to challenge Western domination, especially by the United States and France.

In order to carry out this policy, Algerian decision-makers needed first not only to counterbalance the dominance of France in Algeria and the region, but also to develop the country's economy in order to eventually reduce its overall external dependence. To achieve this goal, Algeria had to rely on American technology and capital. Thus, by and large, US-Algeria relations have been marked by nearly constant conflict in the politico-ideological and strategic sphere, but by mutually beneficial cooperation regarding economic and commercial matters.<sup>3</sup> While Algeria had severed diplomatic relations with the United States for seven years following the Six Day War in 1967, the latter became its main trading partner during that period. In sum, Algerians have sought to disconnect economic relations from political and ideological considerations.

This economic pragmatism peaked in the 1970s when Algerian leaders decided to lay the foundations for national economic development and growth. This was a difficult task, because while they adopted "neutral" trade relations with foreign partners, they nevertheless remained committed to their principles of non-alignment, anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism and national independence in their political-strategic interface with their partners at the multilateral level. The best example of this was the struggle for a new international economic order (NIEO) in which Algeria played an important role in the 1970s. In response to the rise of Algeria, not only in the North Africa region, but also in international affairs in general, the United States decided to strengthen the military capacity of Algeria's North African neighbors, namely Tunisia and Morocco. This was announced publicly by a US official, who argued that since Algeria had aroused fear and mistrust among its neighbors, the United States would respond with minimal programs for Morocco and Tunisia that were designed specifically for defensive purposes.<sup>4</sup> American policymakers were then increasingly concerned about the supply of Soviet arms to Algeria, and expressed apprehension that the Algerian military capacity would represent a threat to Israel and pro-American Arab states.

US-Algerian relations have dramatically improved in recent years. But perceptions formed during the liberation war and the two decades that followed continue to influence relations between the two countries, albeit to a lesser degree since the late 1990s. These include

perspectives on the conflicts in the Middle East and Western Sahara. Unlike Morocco and Tunisia, which have enjoyed a positive image in Washington because of their ideological orientation (with an “over-identification” of US authorities with their regimes), the Algerian government has suffered from what former US Ambassador Richard Parker has called an “under-identification.” In fact, “the image of Algeria becoming a second Cuba has often been mentioned in American political circles.”<sup>5</sup> The United States has always believed that the positions of Algeria, as “the bad guy,” on many issues, were harmful to US interests, unlike those of Morocco and Tunisia, “the good guys.”<sup>6</sup>

Disagreements between Algeria and the United States, mainly in the multilateral context, didn’t prevent the two countries from resuming diplomatic ties in 1974, with the US administration increasingly realizing that Algeria had to be taken into account not only economically but also politically. Henry Kissinger went as far as stating in the 1970s that Algeria should be included in the Arab-Israeli peace process if it were to succeed.<sup>7</sup> But the Western Sahara issue, emerging at the height of the Cold War, put an end to the prospect of strong relations between Algeria and the United States. The end of the armed conflict between the Sahrawi and Moroccans in September 1991 did not dispel Algerian resentment against the United States, even if other events, especially those of September 11, 2001, led to close cooperation between the two countries in the global fight against terrorism.

### **Western Sahara and Algerian-American relations**

It is not attempting to rewrite the history of the Western Sahara conflict to emphasize that the United States played a leading role in it. The emergence of the conflict coincided with increased polarization in the Middle East, a greater involvement of the Soviet Union in Africa following the collapse of the Portuguese colonial empire, the end of the Cold War, and the development of closer relationships between Algeria and the United States. This situation did not induce a major change in American policy with regard to the Western Sahara issue, however. The United States, according to former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, could not allow the emergence of “another Angola on the Atlantic.” It put pressure on Spain to cede its former colony to Morocco, and gave a green light to the latter to proceed with the occupation of the disputed territory.

Promises of improved relations between Algeria and the United States have been short-lived because of this pro-Moroccan stand. It has significantly contributed to poisoning relations between the two countries, despite the fact that the conflict was regional and therefore not part of the East-West tensions of the time. On the other hand, the conflict brought the United States and Morocco even closer, especially regarding military and political cooperation. The biggest blow to Algerians was the US decision in the late 1970s to sell offensive weapons to Morocco, a policy that has not changed since then. The decisive role of Algeria in the release of American hostages in Iran (1979-1981) did nothing to encourage the United States to change its attitude. The dominant perception in Washington persists: Morocco is a stable kingdom, reliable and a friend of the United States.

US policymakers have put forward two other arguments to support the Moroccan autonomy plan within the kingdom of Morocco of the disputed territory: The first one is that Western Sahara is too small a country and thereby threatens to become a hotbed of terrorism and instability, an argument that Morocco has used. The second reason invoked since the 1970s is that the

independence of Western Sahara would dangerously destabilize the Moroccan monarchy. David Welch, then Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, recognized before Congress on June 6, 2007 that “we [the US] worked with them [the Moroccans] on it [the autonomy plan].”<sup>8</sup>

Algerians on the other hand, have tried to convince their American counterparts that in order to preserve the stability of the Moroccan monarchy as they see it, the United States may end up destabilizing the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. They argue that from Chad to the Atlantic, the whole region is full of unresolved pockets of subversion. Imposing an unjust solution on the Saharawi people could conceivably cause an implosion. Although the Polisario Front has never been involved in terrorist actions, young Sahrawi could be tempted, out of despair, to join one of these subversive movements. Since the pro-Moroccan position of the United States has not prevented Algeria from working closely with America in the fight against terrorism, Americans have not felt the need to support a solution to the Western Sahara issue more in accordance with international law and UN resolutions. Although it was initially unclear whether the United States would change its position under President Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton’s statement in November 2009 in Marrakesh that, “Our policy has not changed...I think it’s important for me to reaffirm here in Morocco that there has been no change in policy”<sup>9</sup> has been a disappointment for Algerians who anticipated that the Obama Administration would be more evenhanded on the question. Although US officials have encouraged Sahrawi and Moroccans to negotiate with no preconditions, in reality, the US, at least on the basis of Hillary Clinton’s statements, favors the Moroccan plan. Indeed, when asked about the autonomy plan, Clinton signaled that there was “no change in the Obama Administration’s position as far as the Moroccan autonomy plan in the Sahara is concerned.” She stated that:

Well, this is a plan, as you know, that originated in the Clinton Administration. It was reaffirmed in the Bush Administration and it remains the policy of the United States in the Obama Administration. Now, we are supporting the United Nations process because we think that if there can be a peaceful resolution to the difficulties that exist with your neighbors, both to the east and to the south and the west that is in everyone’s interest. But because of our long relationship, we are very aware of how challenging the circumstances are. And I don’t want anyone in the region or elsewhere to have any doubt about our policy, which remains the same.<sup>10</sup>

Despite claims by US officials concerning the strategic importance of Algeria, Morocco remains the pillar of US policy in the Maghreb.<sup>11</sup> The failure of Algerian policy has more to do with the refusal of Algeria’s leadership to align with US positions, despite cooperation in combating terrorism, than with a failure of Algerian diplomacy. The refusal to reopen the land border with Morocco and revive the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU)—with the reopening as a pre-condition—or to subscribe to the regional economic integration project promoted by, among others, former Under-Secretary of Commerce for International Trade Stuart E. Eizenstadt, which also has the reopening of the border as a precondition, is not only meant to wear off Morocco economically and financially, but also to communicate to the United States and France that Algeria refuses a *fait accompli* in Western Sahara. The border closure in 1994 was a spontaneous reaction by the Algerian authorities, but it is likely that when they realized that the closure had a negative impact on Morocco’s economy, they decided to keep it closed for as long as Morocco is unwilling to alter its position regarding Western Sahara. The Algerian political-military establishment is opposed to the illegal annexation of Western Sahara, seen as a threat to Algeria’s national

security, especially since Morocco occasionally refers to parts of Algerian territory as being Moroccan. The stalemate in the conflict has of course resulted in heightened tension in Algerian-Moroccan relations and a costly regional arms race.

### **The United States and Islamism in Algeria**

The issue of Islamism constituted a major factor of disagreement between the United States and Algeria. The US has exercised flexibility with respect to this phenomenon, for which there are several American definitions. US policies depend on the category in which an Islamist movement is classified. This ambivalence appears in various positions on Islamism within the US government. Some positions are defined as “accommodationist” or conciliatory; others as “eradicationist.” The former see no danger from “moderate” Islamism, perceived as a natural progression in Muslim societies; they also consider the possibility that moderate Islamists may compel authoritarian regimes to democratize and open up their political system to various political forces. “Accommodationists” have confused Islamism with Islam or with being a Muslim, however. By doing so, they have ignored the important fact that Islamism is a political phenomenon that exploits the Islamic religion, to which it gives a new interpretation in order to achieve political and ideological goals. For “accommodationists,” the main idea is to involve and integrate the Islamists in the democratization process. As to the “eradicationists,” they see no difference between moderate and radical Islamists. To them, Islamism is a threat to Western interests in general and those of the United States in particular. They encourage the US government to support whatever regimes are in place and help eradicate this phenomenon.

The United States and Algeria have also taken divergent positions on terrorism. While Algerians make a distinction between legitimate armed struggle or revolutionary violence against occupation, and terrorism that targets civilians and legal institutions of a State, the United States tends to give both activities the same designation. The Algerians, who, like Americans, have waged a war of liberation using violence as an instrument to achieve their objective, did not characterize the PLO and its military wing Fatah or Hamas as terrorist organizations, because they consider both of them to be resistance movements. For the Algerians, the use of armed force by these organizations is a legitimate right. Although Algeria has signed the International Convention on Terrorism, it warns against “any provision or stipulation that would undermine peoples’ legitimate struggle to regain their freedom, or designed to discredit a specific religious community.”<sup>12</sup> The appeal made to the UN by the Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs in October 2008 was clearly referring to Palestinian and Lebanese resistance to Israeli occupation, and to the attacks on Islam because of the actions of Islamist extremists. US officials have difficulty understanding Algeria’s determined position on this issue, which is of course explained by its historical experience.

On the subject of Islamism, the United States didn’t consider its development in Algeria (and Tunisia, at least initially) as a threat to its interests. The primary menace to American interests in the region was thought to emanate from Libya (terrorism, the building of chemical plants, etc.). The Islamic Salvation Front’s (FIS) overwhelming victory in the June 1990 Algerian municipal elections did not worry Washington, especially since Algeria has no strategic importance for the United States, whose main concern then was the situation in the Persian Gulf following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. FIS support to Saddam Hussein was worrisome, however, because it could mean that an Algeria controlled by the Islamist party would not necessarily be favorable to US

interests. For many US policymakers, this could not be worse than the opposition of the Algerian regime to US intervention in Iraq, including Algeria's call to solve the problem within the region through the Arab League. In November 1991, a State Department official declared that "in the United Nations, Libya [the US nemesis] voted 14% of the time with the US while Algeria only 7%!"<sup>13</sup> Even if Chadli Benjedid's presidency (1979-1992) was more pragmatic than his predecessor's, the image of Algeria as a state whose foreign policy objectives threatened the interests of the United States persisted. In fact, until now, Algeria has voted 74 percent of the time against US positions within the United Nations.<sup>14</sup> Algeria's vote at the United Nations is not very different from that of most Arab countries, even those very close to Washington, but the United States gives it more consideration because Algeria is influential in Third World circles and is viewed as harboring antagonistic intentions toward US interests.

It is not an exaggeration to assert that in the early 1990s, the United States lacked a clear policy vis-à-vis Algeria. A high-ranking White House official told the author of this paper in 1997: "Algeria was not a concern to us. There was not much discussion at the National Security Council, although we were very concerned that an extremist Islamist group took power and then would export terrorism as did Iran. But we knew that there was not much we could do in regard to Algeria. We had no real policy. I remember that Brent Scowcroft [National Security Advisor to George Bush Sr.] told us that there were some concerns regarding Algeria [after the cancellation of the parliamentary elections 1st round], but there was not much discussion on this subject."

There is no indication that the United States perceived the FIS as a radical party that should be prevented from coming to power; this does not mean, however, that all the officials in the US government shared this view. Indeed, other policymakers were concerned about the expansion of Islamist radicals and the possibility that they would rise to power. The fact that Algeria has never been essential to American strategic, economic and political interests, and that the United States has a negligible influence on the North African country, explain the ambivalent policy pursued by Washington during the civil conflict that destabilized Algeria throughout the 1990s. In terms of policy, the United States adopted a rather complacent position on Islamism in Algeria and a much tougher attitude in relation to the regime, accusing it of being responsible for the crisis. During practically the entire Clinton presidency, "accommodationists" dominated the debates, which meant that pressure was exerted on the Algerian government, condemning its policy of "*le tout sécuritaire*," [all-out security policy].

The United States has not only demanded that the regime initiate reforms, but also sought to integrate the Islamists (including the FIS) into the political process. Washington's support for the two Sant'Edigio (Rome) meetings that brought together Algerian political parties, including the FIS, some members of the National Liberation Front (FLN), FFS (Front des Forces Socialistes), Workers' Party (PT) and Nahda, was undeniable. Unlike France, the United States encouraged a compromise between the Algerian government and the FIS. The US wanted the institutionalization of Islamism in a way similar to what Hassan II has achieved in Morocco. It should be noted that the Islamists called "moderate" are those who do not use violence, but also who are not particularly opposed to US interests (which implies the recognition of Israel, free access to oil wealth for Western companies, and adoption of free-market policies). Those in favor of the integration of moderate Islamists in the power structure believed that it would result in the democratization of authoritarian regimes in Algeria, as well as in other Arab countries. Many US

policymakers thought about using Algeria as a laboratory for a “moderate” Islamic regime, and establishing good relations with it to improve the US image in the Islamic world.<sup>15</sup>

American “conciliators” who encouraged a compromise solution with the FIS thought that this would not only isolate Islamic extremists, but also end the bloodshed that had spread throughout Algeria. While encouraging a compromise, the US government had pressured the Algerian authorities to further liberalize markets, respect human rights and establish a democratic system of government. The Algerian government’s failure to carry out such actions, they argued, would extend the civil conflict. The main objectives underpinning US proposals are fairly easy to discern: (1) promoting “democracy” by integrating “moderate” Islamists in the political system, a position that differed from that of the Europeans, who are hostile to Islamism in general; (2) improving the image of the United States throughout the Muslim world by appearing conciliatory toward Islam; and (3) contributing to the transformation of a socialist revolutionary Algerian regime that is hostile to US interests into a regime integrated in the global system dominated by the United States. Although apprehensive about the Islamist movement, some US policymakers downplayed the possibility of a domino effect in the region, since Morocco has institutionalized Islam (with the King being the chief religious leader as the ‘Commander of the faithful’), and the United States has provided protection to the monarchy. Tunisia had already eradicated Islamism, though moderate, without major objections from Washington.

A majority of US policymakers argued, however, that it would have been a tragic mistake to allow the Islamists to take power in Algeria. Their arguments were similar to those of the neoconservatives who dominated President George W. Bush’s administration. For them, all Islamists (moderates and radicals) want to fight “the American Great Satan” for the supremacy of Islam. Thus, Islamism and militant groups represent a direct threat to regional stability, the fragile democracies of the African continent and the security interests of the United States. In addition, they see Islamism as a global problem that must be dealt with, by, among other actions, supporting the Arab regimes that confront it. What is peculiar in the case of Algeria is that even those opposed to the Islamists held the Algerian government responsible for the conditions that caused instability in the country, and, practically, for the massacre of thousands of civilians that led to the confrontation with radical Islamist insurgents. The regime’s ability to survive despite the quasi arms embargo that was imposed on it is due to a population that did not tilt in favor of the Islamists, and to the victories, albeit pyrrhic, of the security forces. This compelled the US to embrace the “positive conditionality” approach with the authorities in Algiers.

This approach consisted of supporting the regime under the condition that it implements the reforms demanded by the United States, not only on the economic front, but also through the adoption of a reconciliation process that would entail the inclusion of Islamic “moderates” into the political system. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s initiatives, including the Civil Concord Law (September 1999) and the Policy of National Reconciliation (2005 to date), have been welcomed by Washington, although this has ultimately, though unwittingly, contributed to strengthening Islamist opposition movements.

The election of Bouteflika in 1999 was not welcome in Washington because of the context in which it was held—with the withdrawal of six candidates on the eve of the elections, all of them accusing the regime of rigging the vote. But President Bouteflika’s civil concord project; his handshake with Ehud Barak in July 1999; his resolve to integrate the Islamists in the political

game; his promises for reform at all levels; his visit to the United States in July 2001, where he allegedly hinted that he would not oppose a “third way” option for Western Sahara; the positive role of Algeria in the resolution of some conflicts, including those between Ethiopia and Eritrea; and Algeria’s milder position in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations were all factors that enabled the legitimization of the Algerian regime in Washington’s eyes. The determining factor in the rapprochement between the two countries was undoubtedly the terrorist attack against the United States on September 11, 2001.

### **September 11: a factor of rapprochement between the US and Algeria**

For years, the United States, like most European countries, has described the terrorist acts committed by various armed Islamist groups (GIA, GSPC, etc.) against military and civilian targets in Algeria as “political violence,” or as a rather natural, almost legitimate reaction to the violence of the Algerian regime, which interrupted the electoral process on January 11, 1992.<sup>16</sup> Any other interpretation was considered to support the “junta” in power. On the other hand, if Islamist violence in Algeria was justified because of injustice and authoritarianism, no one was allowed to explain that the attacks of September 11, although obviously reprehensible, were perhaps the result of American aggressive policies that have caused so many tragedies in the Arab and Muslim world. Barack Obama in his June 4, 2009 speech in Cairo alluded to the grievances that led to anti-Americanism in the region.

Long before the attacks of 9/11, Algerian security services had already established close cooperation with similar US agencies, such as the FBI, CIA and National Security Agency, in the international fight against terrorism. Americans have understood the need to cooperate with Algeria, which has acquired significant expertise in this field. Beyond unequivocally condemning the attacks, Algerian authorities have engaged in the global coalition against terrorism led by the United States. They gave Washington a list of several hundred militants who fled to Europe and the US, and offered their assistance in the areas of security and intelligence. During his November 2001 visit to Washington, President Bouteflika tried to persuade President Bush that US-Algerian relations should be strengthened and that the fight against terrorism would be futile if its roots were not dealt with—those being poverty and inequality. This vision reflected in some way the views of the neoconservatives, who had made democracy and economic development one of their mottos. In fact, until 2006 and the victory of the Palestinian movement Hamas in parliamentary elections, the Bush administration was giving democracy promotion in the Arab world a national security priority, arguing that greater political freedom would weaken radical Islamism and its ideology.

September 11 opened the way not only to very important bilateral military cooperation between the United States and Algeria, but also allowed the United States to include Algeria in two security systems, the NATO Mediterranean Dialogue in the north, and the Sahel region in the South.

### **Bilateral military and security cooperation**

On the bilateral front, while refusing to sell heavy weapons to Algeria to avoid upsetting the balance of power between that country and Morocco, the United States agreed in 2002 to provide Algerian security forces with efficient equipment<sup>17</sup> to eliminate armed militant “residual” groups

in rural areas. This has enabled the Algerian government to break the arms embargo in force since January 1992, which had compelled it to buy weapons on parallel hypothetical markets in the former communist bloc, South Africa and Turkey.<sup>18</sup>

Taking into account the Algerian government's efforts to fight radical Islamism as well as its geographical position and geopolitical importance, American officials have often declared that Algeria was "an outstanding partner in the global war against terrorism." Former President George W. Bush stated on July 2005 that "America continues to rely on Algeria as its partner in its fight against terrorism, and in our common objective of promoting democracy and prosperity in your region and in the world."<sup>19</sup> During her visit to the Maghreb region in September 2008, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reiterated the same view.<sup>20</sup> On several occasions, the United States has indicated that it might reconsider its position regarding the supply of weapons to Algeria. Algeria does not seem interested in purchasing large quantities of weapons from the United States, however, other than sophisticated night vision equipment and some types of specific radars. After the conversion of its debt with Russia in 2006, Algeria bought \$7 billion worth of Russian weapons, including new MiG20 aircrafts, tanks and other heavy weapons to enhance the capabilities of its armed forces, but also to revamp its stockpiles as much of its equipment had become obsolete.

Despite undeniably close cooperation with the United States, it is worth noting that: 1) the Algerian authorities are not willing to develop an even closer military cooperation with the United States because it would be, in their view, subject mostly to American conditions; and 2) as a matter of principle, Algeria is not willing to become dependent on any foreign power, including the United States, for its military supplies. This explains the diversity of its sources of arms supply: Russia, China, France, South Africa, the United States, former member countries of the Communist bloc and Turkey. In addition, the close alliance of the United States with Morocco, Algeria's main rival in the North Africa region, perpetuates Algeria's suspicions vis-à-vis the United States.

Another indication of close cooperation between the two countries—although it remains to be confirmed—concerns the establishment in Algiers of a CIA-funded secret entity, the "Alliance Base," whose objective is to identify and "eliminate" terrorists.<sup>21</sup> This structure is similar to other entities that the CIA has created in partnership with other Western and Arab intelligence services. Bilateral military cooperation is evident on the ground; in addition to the training of Algerian officers in the United States, the Algerian and US military cooperate closely in the Algerian desert.<sup>22</sup> In May-June 2009, for example, US Special Forces participated in joint operations with Algerian armed forces (ANP) against Islamist armed groups and drug and weapons smuggling networks in southern Algeria. US Special Forces also support ANP counterterrorism operations in the Sahel region. The United States mostly provides information and satellite images to the Algerian military.

Yet the dollar amount of US military aid to Algeria remains insignificant. In 2007, the US provided Algeria with \$806,000 through an international military training and education program, and only \$731,000 dollars for the fight against terrorism.

The issue of US bases in the Algerian desert—purportedly to combat Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—has been the subject of much speculation, even though both countries deny their existence. A close analysis of US military objectives in the region shows that there is no need for permanent bases, or even that existing bases have been identified as American bases. What matters is that US military forces can use existing bases whenever necessary.<sup>23</sup> In November 2006, the Pentagon’s assistant secretary for international security, Peter Rodman, corroborated this analysis during a visit to Algiers: “The US does not want military bases in Algeria. We hope to increase the capacity of local forces, not open bases. We are interested in a strategic and military partnership, the training of officers, joint military exercises, exchange of information, the purchase of military equipment, and exchanges between our officers.”<sup>24</sup>

Privately, however, some US officials admitted that at least one operational base exists in southern Algeria. Algerians for their part insist they will never allow the establishment of foreign bases on their territory because it would be, as stated by Mohamed Bedjaoui, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, “incompatible with the sovereignty and independence of Algeria.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Algeria’s integration in multilateral security systems**

Ever since the era of anti-colonial struggle, Algerians have had a critical attitude vis-à-vis NATO, which supported France, one of its members. Today, Algeria has become an active partner of the Alliance, and the “revolutionary and anti-imperialist” President Bouteflika of the 1970s visited NATO headquarters twice, in 2001 and 2002.

Algeria now participates in NATO’s chief of staff and ministerial meetings in Brussels, and is an associate member of NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Algerian naval forces also take part in joint exercises with the Alliance, such as Operation Active Endeavor. It should be noted that the Algerian military do not appreciate that the United States attempts to partner them with the Israelis in performing some activities through NATO special sessions.<sup>26</sup> Although they have mitigated their deep-seated positions regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Algerians refuse “to normalize” relations with Israel before the Palestinian issue has been resolved satisfactorily, and until Israel returns the occupied Arab territories of Syria and Lebanon. Recent events in Gaza have strengthened this position.

US interests in the Sahel region, a transitional region between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, has a dual dimension: military and economic security. The Sahel region is viewed in Washington as a vulnerable area because of its low population density and permeable borders. US authorities count about 600 terrorist groups—indigenous and international—scattered throughout the region. They are engaged in all kinds of contraband, including weapons, and recruit new members from the local populations.

According to Washington, Islamic terrorist groups represent a threat for this region of more than 100 million inhabitants, described by the US military as a “new Afghanistan.” The most active among these groups is the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, according to its French acronym), which took the name Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007. It is considered “an extremely dangerous organization in the world” by the US. The region is now

regarded as “the new front in the global war against terrorism.” The objective of the United States is to “facilitate cooperation between various governments (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Senegal and Nigeria), and to strengthen their capacity to combat terrorist organizations”<sup>27</sup> and prevent them from establishing local bases as they did in Afghanistan before September 11.

It is within this context that the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) was launched in late 2002, with the purpose of forming military groups specialized in combating terrorism in Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad. In 2003-2004, American Special Forces instructors from the United States European Command (EUROCOM) were seconded to train the security forces of these nations. Nigerien and Chadian forces have fought GSPC elements in their respective countries. After US policymakers assessed the PSI as a real success, a follow-up initiative was launched in 2002 under the name Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative or TSCTI (now called partnership instead of initiative or TSCTP). Its objective is to build counterterrorism capacity in the region, and to consolidate and institutionalize cooperation between security forces. Algerian armed forces together with the forces of countries from the Maghreb and Sahel regions have been involved in biennially military exercises known as Flintlock 2005 and Flintlock 2007. Other nations like Burkina Faso, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and France also participated in Flintlock 2007. In November 2008, 14 nations participated in Flintlock 09, “developed as a joint multinational exercise to improve information sharing at the operational and tactical levels across the Saharan region while fostering increased collaboration and coordination.”<sup>28</sup> From 3-23 May, Flintlock 2010 focused “on improving military interoperability and capacity-building of participating militaries from Northern and Western Africa, Europe and the United States.”<sup>29</sup>

Although Algeria joined the TSCTP without reservation, it remained fiercely opposed to the new US military command for Africa, known as Africa Command, or AFRICOM, which has been operational since October 2007. Algerians have argued consistently and strongly that the African Union is endowed with the necessary collective security mechanisms to address security issues on the continent.<sup>30</sup> In 2007, a series of consultations with the governments of a number of African countries, including Morocco, and Algeria, were conducted to establish AFRICOM headquarters. None of them were willing to commit to hosting the new command, although Moroccan officials considered AFRICOM, if it were established on their territory, as an opportunity to prevent the establishment of a close alliance between Algiers and Washington, and to put an end to the Polisario front. Morocco had previously tried unsuccessfully to propagate the farfetched idea that the Polisario front is allied with AQIM, and, during the Cold War, the baseless allegation that the Saharan liberation movement was close to communist countries opposed to US interests.

Like the other countries in the region, Morocco in the end refrained from hosting AFRICOM, which would have triggered negative reactions not only from influential Islamist groups in the country, but also from large segments of Moroccan society. Algeria’s use of its influence to convince other African countries not to host AFRICOM was certainly not well received in the United States, which is still reluctant to accept Algerian nationalism and nonalignment. US eagerness to multiply security partnerships with African countries and to create a specific military command for Africa has been viewed suspiciously, raising questions about its real motives.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of these political considerations, security relations between Algeria and

the United States are stronger than anyone imagined hitherto.<sup>32</sup> A multitude of senior US officials, including the head of AFRICOM, General Ward “Kip” Ward, went to Algeria in 2009; their objective was to encourage Algeria to participate more actively in AFRICOM activities and perhaps even to eventually host it. Algerians refused but fear that Morocco might do so—Moroccans have said that much—<sup>33</sup> in which case it would force Algerians to review their national security strategy. This partly explains why although Algeria refuses to host AFRICOM, it has deepened bilateral security relations with the United States and to take the lead in regional security cooperation. Thus, on 16 March 2010, Algeria organized a successful ministerial conference in Algiers that brought together the Sahara-Sahel countries, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad. The main objective was to strengthen the war on terrorism in the region and to implement UN antiterrorism resolution 1904 (December 2009)<sup>34</sup> that criminalizes the payment of ransoms to hostage takers who use the ransoms to fund terrorist activities.<sup>35</sup> Needless to say, the United States expressed great support for this initiative.<sup>36</sup> Clearly, Algeria’s interest in leading is aimed at avoiding much foreign, mainly US, direct involvement in the region; Algerians have insisted that they reject foreign interference in the region, and that the best way to combat terrorism is through bilateral relations and regional cooperation. In other words, the countries making up the region are responsible for the region’s security.<sup>37</sup>

### **Relations in trade and energy**

Economic relations between Algeria and the United States have also expanded significantly. During President Bouteflika’s visit to the United States in July 2001, the two countries signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, establishing a consultative process on trade and investment that led to a bilateral treaty on investment, trade benefits and taxation. This allowed an intensification of Algeria’s oil and gas exploitation by multinational corporations. The objective of the agreement was to double trade volume between the two countries and allow American companies to get a larger share of the Algerian market, particularly in the oil sector. The United States is currently the largest investor in this sector.

In recent years, American companies have shown interests in other sectors of the Algerian economy,<sup>38</sup> and have invested in some that are promising—finance, banking, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, sea-water desalination, aviation, transportation, housing, public works, water resources, and information technology. American investors were eager to get a share of large Algerian projects such as the building of a million homes, the east-west highway and the Algiers subway, and to compete with Chinese and French companies that are already significantly present in Algeria. A free trade agreement between the United States and Algeria is also in the works.

Bilateral trade between Algeria and the United States is growing steadily, and figures from the Algerian embassy show that trade volume exceeded \$12 billion in 2009.<sup>39</sup> The US Department of State indicates that in 2007, US direct investment in Algeria totaled \$5.45 billion, mostly in the hydrocarbon sector, which is dominated by American companies. Algeria is the third-largest market in the Arab world for the United States. US exports to Algeria totaled \$1.2 billion in 2005, a growth of over 50 percent compared to 2003; US imports from Algeria increased from \$4.7 billion in 2002 to \$10.8 billion in 2005 to a record \$22 billion in 2008, mainly in the form

of oil and liquefied natural gas.<sup>40</sup> In March 2004, President Bush designated Algeria as eligible for the Generalized System of Preferences, a reduced duty program.<sup>41</sup> Algeria is now the second largest partner of the United States in the Arab world, and the United States is the largest trading partner of Algeria in the world.

Despite these positive developments in economic relations, American investments outside the oil sector remain relatively small. In fact, North Africa's share of global foreign direct investment (FDI) is generally insignificant, estimated at \$5 billion annually, with 75 percent of these investments from EU countries. Algeria has great ambitions regarding its economic relations with the United States, but a certain naiveté characterizes Algerian decision-makers who believe that the US government can persuade US companies to invest in Algeria. This perception is derived from Algeria's experience with France, where the government can encourage the business community to invest in a country for political and economic reasons. The main obstacle to attracting American investments outside the oil sector is arguably Algeria's cumbersome bureaucracy, corruption, and the general lack of transparency. The US ambassador to Algeria, Mr. David Pearce, said explicitly: "I think there are many business opportunities in Algeria, but we must wait a little because there are problems with the bureaucracy, a certain lack of transparency, slow customs procedures, etc. Security is not really the main obstacle to investment; rather, the main obstacles are of a practical nature."<sup>42</sup> US companies have also put investments on hold while waiting for clarification from the Algerian Government on the latest measures regarding foreign investments in the country.<sup>43</sup> The Algerian government has realized the consequences of corruption on the economy and has decided to crackdown on high-level executives in the public sector accused of corruption and/or mismanagement. Hence, the CEO and top managers of the national oil company SONATRACH have been charged for corruption and the all-powerful minister of energy has been removed from office in the last ministerial reshuffle in late May 2010.

Despite the relative liberalization of the economy, American companies still find it cumbersome to conduct business in Algeria regardless of profit potential. Given America's strong dependence on imported oil, however, Algeria will remain for the foreseeable future a strategic market for the United States. According to the CIA, Algeria has the world's eighth-largest reserves of natural gas, and is the fourth-largest gas exporter, as well as the 14th biggest oil producer.<sup>44</sup>

The United States and Algeria are also engaged in cooperation on civil nuclear matters, although Algeria has done the same with other countries, notably France, Russia, Argentina, and China.

## **Conclusion**

Without a doubt, US-Algerian relations have expanded considerably in recent years. Despite Algeria's strategic, economic and political importance for American policy in the Maghreb, however, the United States remains much more sensitive to Moroccan interests than to those of Algeria. This is explained by historical, ideological, political and military reasons. Misunderstandings and disagreements that marked US-Algerian relations until the last decade have generated mutual distrust between the two countries.

Regardless of the rapprochement between the US and Algeria, this mistrust has not completely dissipated. Such issues as Algeria's support for national liberation movements or disagreements in relation to the conflicts in Palestine and Western Sahara, and the special relationship between the US and Morocco, have prevented the development of closer relations between the two countries and help explain the hesitation in establishing a strong alliance. The new pragmatism in Algerian foreign policy notwithstanding,<sup>45</sup> Algeria's positions are often in opposition to US policies. This applies to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Western Sahara dispute, not only because of Algeria's historical experience with nationalism, but also for reasons of national security (with regard to Western Sahara).

That said, whatever their differences, relations between Algeria and the United States are characterized by mutual respect. Algeria played a role in 1981 in the release of the American hostages held in Iran, and in 2005, it tried to mediate between the US and Iran to resolve their differences over the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>46</sup> But the main questions are: To what extent will the United States influence the orientation of Algeria's foreign policy, especially in relation to its founding principles, namely non-alignment, nationalism, and support for Palestinian and other Arab and Third World causes? To what extent are the Algerians willing to pursue pragmatic approaches in order to achieve their interests? Are they ready to give the United States as much latitude as does their regional rival, Morocco? Will Algeria abandon its principles, and integrate the US sphere of influence in order to reap some benefits? So far, the Algerians are unwilling to abandon their support for the Palestinians or the Sahrawi. But the competition they face, not only from Morocco but also from a rehabilitated Libya, is such that they could decide to make substantial changes in their perception of their national interest. So far, key issues continue to divide Algerians and Americans. Their respective motivations to overcome these issues will constitute the foundations of a new era in their relations.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly updated version of the article published in the French journal, *Maghreb-Machrek* (Issue 200, summer 2009), titled "*Les États-Unis et l'Algérie: antagonisme, pragmatisme et coopération.*" For a more detailed analysis, see, Yahia H. Zoubir, "The U.S. and Algeria: Hostility, Pragmatism, and Partnership, in Robert E. Looney. *Handbook of US-Middle East Relations—Formative Factors and Regional Perspectives* (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), pp.219-236.

<sup>2</sup> The United States had difficulties grasping what an American scholar understood from the start; namely, that Algerian leaders judged foreign nations in relation to their position toward the Algerian cause. See Charles F. Gallagher, *The United States and North Africa: Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard-University Press, 1963.

<sup>3</sup> Amine Aït-Chaalal, *L'Algérie, les États-Unis et la France: des discours à l'action*. Paris : Publisud, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Palmer II, "The other Africa: The Maghreb," *Walsh lecture series* at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, 9 May 1967, DSB, 29 May 1967.

<sup>5</sup> Richard B. Parker, "US Strategic Interest and the War in the Western Sahara", in Yahia Zoubir and Daniel Volman, *International Dimension of the Western Sahara Conflict*, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1993, pp. 93-102.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Anderson, "Friends and Foes: American Policy in North Africa," in Robert I. Rotberg., ed. *Africa in the 1990s and Beyond: US Opportunities and Choices*, Algonac, Michigan, Reference Publications, Inc., 1988, p.169.

<sup>7</sup> William B. Quandt. *Peace Process—American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution and Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 195..

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- <sup>9</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks With Moroccan Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi-Fihri,” November 2, 2009, available at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/11/131229.htm>, accessed on November 4, 2009.
- <sup>10</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Interview With Fouad Arif of Al-Aoula Television,” Marrakech, Morocco, November 3, 2009, available at: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/11/131354.htm>, accessed, on November 4, 2009.
- <sup>11</sup> Yahia H. Zoubir, “The United States and Morocco: The Long-Lasting Alliance,” in Robert E. Looney. *Handbook of US-Middle East Relations—Formative Factors and Regional Perspectives* (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 237-248.
- <sup>12</sup> See Yasmine Djaber, “L’Algérie plaide pour une convention générale de lutte contre le terrorisme,” *toutsurlalgerie*, September 28, 2008: [www.toutsurlalgerie.com/L-Algerie-plaide-pour-une-convention-generale-de-lutte-conyt-4948.html](http://www.toutsurlalgerie.com/L-Algerie-plaide-pour-une-convention-generale-de-lutte-conyt-4948.html) (consulted on Oct.5, 2008).
- <sup>13</sup> Thomas Miller, Director of the Department of State Office of Maghreb Affairs (1989-1992) at the Middle East Studies Association conference, Washington DC, Nov. 24, 1991.
- <sup>14</sup> Sonya Lyes, “ONU : l’Algérie vote souvent contre les USA,” *toutsurlalgerie*, October 17, 2007, [www.toutsurlalgerie.com/algerie-onu-1389.html](http://www.toutsurlalgerie.com/algerie-onu-1389.html) (consulted on October 18, 2007).
- <sup>15</sup> Edward G. Shirley, “Is Iran’s Present Algeria’s Future?” in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 3, May-June 1995. Edward G. Shirley is the pseudonym of a former CIA official.
- <sup>16</sup> Yahia H. Zoubir, “Resilient Authoritarianism, Uncertain Democratization, and Jihadism in Algeria,” in William J. Crotty (ed.), *Democratic Development and Political Terrorism: The Global Perspective*, Boston, Massachusetts, Northeastern University Press, 2005, pp. 280-300.
- <sup>17</sup> Richard Boucher, spokesman for the US State Department, daily press briefing, Washington, DC, December 11, 2002. Steven R. Weisman, “U.S. to Sell Military Gear to Algeria to Help It Fight Militants,” in *The New York Times*, December 10, 2002.
- <sup>18</sup> See the chapter by Daniel Volman, “Foreign Arms Sales and the Military Balance in the Maghreb,” in Yahia H. Zoubir, *North Africa in Transition: State, Society and Economic Transformation in the 1990s*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1999, pp. 220-221.
- <sup>19</sup> *Algérie Presse Service*, July 4, 2005.
- <sup>20</sup> US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, “Remarks after Meeting with Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika,” Algiers, Algeria, September 6, 2008, [www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/09/109230.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2008/09/109230.htm).
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- <sup>22</sup> See Robert D. Kaplan, *Hog Pilots, Blue Water Grunts—The American Military in the Air, Sea, and on the Ground*, New York, Random House, 2007.
- <sup>23</sup> See Anthea Jonathan, “US eyes North Africa,” in *Politics*, March 10, 2004, available at: [www.news24.com/News24/Africa/News/0,2-11-1447\\_1496197,00.html](http://www.news24.com/News24/Africa/News/0,2-11-1447_1496197,00.html); and Giles Tremlett, “US sends special forces into North Africa,” in *The Guardian*, March 15, 2004.
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- <sup>26</sup> Interview with a high-ranking Algerian military officer who participated in NATO activities, December 2006.
- <sup>27</sup> William P. Pope, “Eliminating Terrorist Sanctuaries: The Role of Security Assistance.” Testimony Before the House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation, US House of Representatives, Washington, DC, March 22, 2005, [www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/43702.htm](http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/43702.htm).
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- <sup>29</sup> Eric S. Elliott, “Flintlock 10 Begins in Burkina Faso,” U.S. AFRICOM Public Affairs, 4 May 2010, available at: <http://www.africom.mil/getArticle.asp?art=4364&lang=0>, accessed 6 May 2010.
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<sup>31</sup> Shashank Bengali, "The Pentagon's new Africa command raises suspicions about US motives," in *McClatchy Newspapers*, September 29, 2008, [http://news.yahoo.com/s/mcclatchy/20080929/wl\\_mcclatchy/3058466](http://news.yahoo.com/s/mcclatchy/20080929/wl_mcclatchy/3058466). See also, Clement M. Henry, "Reverberations in the Central Maghreb of the 'Global War on Terror,'" in Yahia H. Zoubir and Haizam Amirah-Fernández, *North Africa: Politics, Region, and the Limits of Transformation* (London & NY: Routledge, 2008), pp. 294-310.

<sup>32</sup> Yahia H. Zoubir, "The United States and Maghreb-Sahel Security," *International Affairs*, 85, 5, September 2009, pp. 977-995.

<sup>33</sup> Hassan Zerrouky, "Alger refuserait d'abriter l'Africom," *L'Humanité* (Paris), 17 March 2010, available at: [http://www.humanite.fr/2010-03-17\\_International\\_Alger-refuserait-d-abriter-l-Africom](http://www.humanite.fr/2010-03-17_International_Alger-refuserait-d-abriter-l-Africom), accessed on 20 March 2010.

<sup>34</sup> United Nations Security Council, *United Nations S/RES/1904 (2009)*, Adopted by the Security Council at its 6247th meeting, on 17 December 2009.

<sup>35</sup> "Messahel: lutte antiterroriste, les participants se sont engagés à mettre en œuvre les conventions," Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 March 2011, available at : [http://193.194.78.233/ma\\_fr/stories.php?story=10/03/21/5613238](http://193.194.78.233/ma_fr/stories.php?story=10/03/21/5613238), accessed on 23 March 2010.

<sup>36</sup> See, Philip J. Crowley, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC, March 16, 2010, available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/03/138370.htm>, accessed on 18 March 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Selima Tlemçani, "Conférence ministérielle d'Alger contre le terrorisme : Éloigner toute ingérence dans la région du Sahel," *El Watan* (Algiers), 18 March 2010, available at: <http://www.elwatan.com/Conference-ministerielle-d-Alger>, accessed 18 March 2010.

<sup>38</sup> "US Encourages Opening of Algerian Economy." US Deputy Secretary of Commerce Bodman's Press Conference in Algiers, September 25, 2002, [www.usinfo.state.gov](http://www.usinfo.state.gov).

<sup>39</sup> See [www.algeria-us.org/content/view/230/149/](http://www.algeria-us.org/content/view/230/149/).

<sup>40</sup> Comparatively, US exports to Algeria amounted to less than \$1 billion in 1990.

<sup>41</sup> [www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/8005.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/8005.htm).

<sup>42</sup> Sonia Lyes, "Climat des affaires, armement, situation au Sahel et Sahara occidental : les explications de l'ambassadeur US à Alger," *toutsurlalgerie*, May 24, 2009, [http://www.tsa-algerie.com/diplomatie/climat-des-affaires-armement-situation-au-sahel-et-sahara-occidental-les\\_7027.html](http://www.tsa-algerie.com/diplomatie/climat-des-affaires-armement-situation-au-sahel-et-sahara-occidental-les_7027.html), accessed on May 25, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Meziane Rabhi, "L'ambassadeur us dément tout gel des investissements: Les Américains tiennent à leur part de marché en Algérie," in *Liberté*, June 2, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> See [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ag.html#Econ](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ag.html#Econ).

<sup>45</sup> Yahia H. Zoubir, "The Dialectics of Algeria's Foreign Relations from 1990 to the Present," in Ahmed Aghrout and Rédha Bougherira (eds.), *Algeria in Transition—Reforms and Development Prospects*, Routledge, London: 2004, pp. 151-182.

<sup>46</sup> Amine Goutali, "Iran - États-Unis : l'Algérie pour "désamorcer" la crise" [Iran-United States: Algeria to defuse the crisis], in *L'Expression*, April 5, 2005.