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Algeria's South: Trouble's Bellwether

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Executive Summary

Since 2013, the politically marginal but economically crucial oil-producing areas of the Algerian south have experienced successive waves of unrest over what may appear local economic, environmental and communal issues. Taken together, however, a pattern emerges: resentment is growing against central authorities in a part of the country long peripheral to its politics. Thus far, authorities have managed this burgeoning discontent with a stick-and-carrot policy that has kept a tenuous peace but not addressed underlying issues. Ahead of an uncertain presidential succession and given the painful consequences of low oil prices, Algeria should go beyond treating the symptoms to address governance shortcomings and include its peripheral populations in political decision-making. It should do so now, when the challenges are still amply manageable, rather than allow them to fester and bleed dangerously into the coming political transition.

Three separate movements in three southern cities have evolved in recent years to mobilise thousands of Algerians, both in the desert region and elsewhere in the country. The historic town of Ghardaia has seen recurrent clashes between Sunni Arabs and a Berber minority that follows Ibadism, an Islamic school of jurisprudence, in a rare instance of sectarian violence in an overwhelmingly Sunni country. In the far south, the town of In Salah has given birth to the Maghreb's most significant ecological protest movement, with thousands mobilising against shale gas exploration the government concealed. In Ouargla, widespread unemployment has provoked unrest by local youths, who have formed a movement that demands an end to what they consider central-authority neglect.

These issues, long considered politically marginal, must be taken seriously, not only for the sake of the vast region, but also because of their growing and very real impact on the country's political "core" in the north. Central authorities in Algiers, who tend to view local discontent with suspicion, have failed to appreciate its depth. They continue to think in terms of handouts, repression and policing, tools which have barely kept a lid on an occasionally violent cauldron. That most of the south remains calm, and the state has managed to restore order in the areas where there has been turmoil, indicates southern unrest is still manageable. Defusing the possibility of renewal and spread is an opportunity as well as a necessity: deep political engagement would pay dividends across the country.

Facing the most serious economic challenges in decades due to falling oil production and low international prices, Algeria is less and less able to substitute spending for inclusive politics and good governance. A strategy that helped secure peace in the 2000s – when it was still recovering from a conflict between the state and Islamist insurgents that claimed over 200,000 lives and pursuing national reconciliation – is no longer viable. The unrest of the last few years demonstrates that southern citizens are no longer willing to put aside their demands for improved transparency, communication and respect from their government.

The Algerian state, born of a long struggle against colonialism and an advocate for a strict doctrine of sovereignty, is certain to reject anything it perceives as meddling, which is how it often interprets outside advice. But it should listen to its citizens: much of the protesters' outrage derives from their sense that they are neither being

heard nor engaged. The government should consider several meritorious demands whose fulfilment would contribute to building greater trust. These include:

- ❑ establishing a parliamentary enquiry, or another form of independent investigation, headed by personalities accepted by locals, to examine intercommunal relations in Ghardaia. Such an entity could look into causes of past violence, devise measures to improve community relations, assess what reparations could be made and offer recommendations to improve policing strategies and local governance;
- ❑ creating more transparent procedures for public-sector hiring and improving guarantees of fairness in making such appointments. Encouraging responsible private investment and diversification from extractive industries in Saharan provinces would also relieve pressure on the state to create jobs that burden its finances; and
- ❑ adopting a more transparent policy toward shale gas exploration and production, starting with clearly stating where it is pursued, and encouraging research into its potentially adverse local effects and how to mitigate them. This could take the form of dialogues with local populations as well as encouraging academia, civil society groups and private-sector partners to participate. At the national level, the authorities should encourage open discussion of fracking's potential economic benefits and environmental pitfalls.

Southern unrest is a bellwether of a wider governance problem that jihadist groups have already sought to capitalise upon. If recognised early, it could prompt a course correction that would defuse tensions at a time of global geopolitical upheaval, regional turmoil, economic downturn and political uncertainty. The lessons learned from such an exercise would have relevance for other challenges the country faces in the years ahead.

Algiers/Brussels, 21 November 2016

Algeria's South: Trouble's Bellwether

I. Introduction

The Algerian south, the vast area beyond the Atlas Mountains and the High Plateaux that border the Mediterranean, comprising 85 per cent of the national territory and virtually all its oil and gas reserves but less than 9 per cent of its population, was long sheltered from the mass protests and armed insurrections that have flared up sporadically in the north since the 1980s. But spurred by the Arab uprisings and local grievances, politics in the south has grown increasingly contentious since 2013, and the region has overtaken the north as the epicentre of protest.

Three sites, each with local specificities, have demonstrated over the past few years the potential for seeding wider unrest. Since 2013, intercommunal clashes between Ibadi Mozabites and Sunni Maliki Arabs in the Mزاب Valley have led to dozens of deaths, the burning and looting of thousands of businesses and homes and the destruction of cultural heritage sites, including a UNESCO-classified Ibadite shrine.¹ The remote Saharan town of In Salah became the site of a large mobilisation against shale gas exploitation after the government announced successful test drills nearby in December 2014. Peaceful unemployment protests in the towns of Laghouat and Ouargla were met with arrests and intimidation in 2013.

The state so far has managed to contain tensions through familiar carrots – including *dhamanat* (literally “guarantees”, in this case of various reforms), patronage and largesse – and sticks, such as intimidation and harassment of protest leaders. However effective in the short term, these measures, by failing to address the underlying political causes of unrest, risk exacerbating them in the long run. Conflict and violence are already expanding, overlapping and deepening. New forms of contestation are emerging as the state's welfare role shrinks.² As Crisis Group has advocated regarding foreign policy, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's fourth-term administration needs to build a long-term strategic vision.³

The Algerian state often represents itself as a model of security and stability in troubled times, while critics at home and abroad say that plummeting oil prices and uncertainty about the presidential succession are pushing it toward a new crisis. Contestation in the south could herald promise or peril, depending on how it is managed. If well, it could encourage political inclusivity and transparency; if poorly, it could emerge as a major vulnerability when, as likely in only a few years' time, oil money runs low.

¹ The Mزاب Valley Mozabites are Amazigh followers of the Ibadi school of Islamic jurisprudence, common only in Oman and Zanzibar, but with followers in Algeria, Libya and Tunisia. Malikis follow the school of Islamic jurisprudence founded by Imam Malik Ibn Anas, one of Sunni Islam's four main schools and dominant in the Maghreb.

² Cuts to electricity subsidies, one of a host of moderate austerity measures passed in the 2016 and 2017 budgets, are already sparking new rounds of protests across southern cities such as Biskra, In Salah and Ouargla. See “Algérie: Le Sud grogne contre une facture d'électricité salée”, *Jeune Afrique*, 27 October 2016.

³ Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°164, *Algeria and Its Neighbours*, 12 October 2015.

II. Why the South Matters

A. *The Algerian Sahara*

Algeria took shape as a unified territory only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, after waves of conquest (by the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth and France in the nineteenth centuries) and the settlement of territorial disputes with its neighbour Morocco (in the twentieth). Historically, control over the regions that today comprise the south focused on trade routes; authority was concentrated around the coast, stretching only weakly to the interior and barely to the Sahara.⁴ The French started to define the southern border in the mid-1800s, a process finished only in the early 1900s. Since independence in 1962, the state has worked unevenly to integrate the south into the national fabric.

The central authorities have long had an ambivalent relationship with the southern regions. Weak control there has posed security dilemmas, with, for example, the region famously providing sanctuary for nineteenth century anti-colonial rebel leader Emir Abdelkader in his struggle against the French. Swayed more by wishful thinking than a clear understanding of reality on the ground, the state – first French, later Algerian – has seen southern populations as more amenable to its control than those of the north; this perception was reflected in the mid-nineteenth century notion of “*pénétration pacifique*”, which evolved into the idea of “*le sud tranquille*” in the late twentieth, when the north was awash in violence.⁵ But while political activism long has been more energetic in the north, the misperception of southern passivity has had real and dangerous consequences, arguably contributing to policymakers overlooking the region’s needs and grievances.

As independent Algeria constructed a national identity based on socialist and Arab nationalist ideologies, it sought to reduce inter-regional disparities, with limited success. The south’s hydrocarbon reserves, discovered in the 1950s, shaped the region’s infrastructure, which was built around the extraction and transport of oil and gas. State policy formally emphasised regional equality, but security, particularly but not only since the civil war of the 1990s, has been trump. So too has the Arabisation policy; pursuit of the ostensible goal of national cohesion and social integration by imposing Arabic as the language of education and administration has come at the expense of speakers of French and Amazigh (Berber) dialects, inciting protest among the latter.

In the early 2000s, the contradictions between the Algerian Sahara’s resource wealth and its residents’ relative deprivation grew sharper. The Mouvement des Enfants du Sud pour la Justice (MSJ), founded in 2004, demanded greater economic opportunity and fairer wealth distribution. At a time of rising foreign investment and job growth, southerners saw few of the benefits, even as their region produced most of the nation’s wealth.

⁴ Y. Kouzmine, J. Fontaine, B.E. Yousfi and T. Otmame, “Étapes de la structuration d’un désert: l’espace saharien algérien entre convoitises économiques, projets politiques et aménagement du territoire”, *Annales de géographie*, no. 670, 6 (2009), pp. 659-685.

⁵ See Benjamin Claude Brower, *A Desert Named Peace* (New York, 2009), pp. 22, 207. See Appendix C below for a glossary of terms and phrases, including English translations, for those given only in French in the main text.

At the same time, jihadist activity expanded. Abdelmalek Droukdel, leader of the Kabylie-based jihadist Groupe pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC), an Algerian body founded in 1998, shifted his focus from the north, curbed his ambitions of striking Europe, which his group had failed to do, and concentrated on forming Saharan *katibas* (brigades). Under Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abdelhamid Abu Zeid, these carried out attacks against Western targets in parts of the Algerian Sahara and the wider Sahel region, such as Mali and Mauritania, where security was weak.⁶ They grew rich off smuggling as well as ransoms for Western hostages.⁷

The GSPC formally affiliated with al-Qaeda in 2007, when it was renamed al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Jihadist interest in the Sahara, which during the 1990s was mainly a logistical and support hub, culminated in AQIM's 2012 seizure of northern Mali, in cooperation with the trans-Saharan jihadist groups Ansar Dine and the Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). France's Operation Serval, launched in January 2013, led to the recapture of northern Malian towns, but attacks on military and civilian targets there remain common, while implementation of the Algiers peace agreement signed between non-jihadist northern rebels and the Malian authorities in June 2015 has stalled.⁸

B. A Resource-rich Region

Longstanding southern frustrations have grown sharper in the past decade and a half as a result of mismanagement and changes in the global economy. In the early 2000s, President Bouteflika's administration raised expectations of rising wealth when he liberalised the oil and gas industry.⁹ A new Hydrocarbons Law in 2005, which aimed to attract foreign investment by loosening ownership requirements, set off a wave of exploration and production in the south.¹⁰ But Bouteflika, for reasons that remain unclear, backtracked when the 2006 Hydrocarbons Order reinstated the requirement that the state oil company, Sonatrach, have a majority stake in almost all upstream, midstream and downstream activities.

Over the next years, culminating in 2013, southern hopes soured. Even as oil prices soared, enabling Algeria to amass foreign exchange reserves of \$200 billion in 2012, social investments failed to materialise, and corruption scandals multiplied.

⁶ The Sahara Desert includes most of North Africa east of the Atlas Mountains and south of the fertile regions of the Mediterranean coast. In this report, "Algerian Sahara" means the part in Algeria, and Sahel refers to the semi-arid region on the Sahara's southern edge stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, including southernmost Algeria and parts of neighbour states.

⁷ See Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The fractured jihadi movement in the Sahara", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 10 January 2014. AQIM Emir Abdelmalek Droukdel, an "Arab Afghan" and former GSPC commander, is believed to still be based in the Kabylie region. His Sahara deputy, Abdelhamid Abu Zeid, was killed in a French airstrike in northern Mali in February 2013. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, mastermind of the In Amenas attack, commands the al-Morabitoun jihadist group, which has links to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) and is responsible for attacks as far west as Ivory Coast. Despite repeated reports of his death, including in a U.S. airstrike targeting him in Libya in June 2015, he is believed to be alive.

⁸ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°226, *Mali: An Imposed Peace?*, 22 May 2015; Africa Briefing N°115, *Mali: Peace from Below?*, 14 December 2015.

⁹ Unemployed urban youth recalled their expectations that new jobs and investments would benefit them. Crisis Group interview, southern activists, Ouargla, May 2015.

¹⁰ The 2005 law ended Sonatrach's monopoly on exploration, production and transportation, forcing it to compete with international oil companies investing in the liberalised activities.

Many southerners came to perceive national authorities and multinational companies as at best reckless and at worst criminal. A southern activist said, “Bouteflika authorised them to come, all kinds of companies with all sorts of activities, and they dug in the south without protecting the environment and do nothing for the society. They don’t even create local jobs: they bring their own employees”.¹¹

In 2010, after a six-month investigation by the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS) – the now-defunct but then-powerful intelligence agency often at loggerheads with the presidency in the last decade – corruption charges were brought against Sonatrach CEO Mohamed Meziane, his two sons and several top managers. Corruption at the highest levels of the company, which is involved in every oil operation in the country, is alleged to have cost Algeria billions of dollars in annual revenue in the oil sector alone.¹²

Over the past five years, oil production has declined, as bureaucratic hurdles and poor management of oil and conventional gas reserves have driven investors away. Algeria depends on hydrocarbon exports for 98 per cent of its foreign earnings (70 per cent of national revenue). Declining production for export, rising domestic demand due to population growth and the vertiginous drop in oil prices in 2015 mean that a fiscal breaking point looms on the three-year horizon: at current spending levels, the Fond de régulation des recettes, the revenue regulation sovereign wealth fund created in 2000 to manage surplus hydrocarbon revenue, is expected to run out in 2016, and foreign exchange reserves, which fell \$35 billion in 2015 to \$143 billion, are expected to be exhausted by 2018.¹³

The government has sought a solution in shale gas exploration. The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) estimates that Algeria has almost 20 trillion cubic metres (707 trillion cubic feet) of technically recoverable shale gas and 5.7 billion barrels of technically recoverable shale oil, placing it third after China and Argentina in technically recoverable shale gas resources.¹⁴ A long-time analyst of its hydrocarbon sector said:

Shale is Algeria’s get-out-of-jail-free card. The industry perspective right now is that Algeria is an also-ran – they’re there producing oil and gas but not in any interesting or competitive way. But if they become a shale producer then they can meet their domestic energy needs and export to Europe.¹⁵

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, southern activist, Adrar, May 2015.

¹² Aomar Aouli, “Algeria oil corruption trial begins after 5-year delay”, Associated Press, 15 March 2015. For background on the rivalry between the DRS and President Bouteflika, see Crisis Group, Report *Algeria and Its Neighbours*, op. cit. ENI subsidiary Saipem is on trial over allegations it paid \$200 million in bribes to Sonatrach, 2007-2010, in exchange for seven contracts worth €8 billion. In early 2016, a criminal court sentenced six, including Meziane and his two sons, to jail for corruption offences ranging from embezzling public funds to accepting bribes. “Affaire Sonatrach 1: sursis pour Mohamed Meziane, prison ferme pour son fils”, TSA, 2 February 2016.

¹³ British Gas and Total have each abandoned a field within the past two years, due to obstacles such as a new three-year exploration license when five to ten years is the industry standard. Response to bidding rounds since 2007 has been “dismal”. Crisis Group interview, international oil company executive, Algiers, May 2015. George Joffe, “Fracking won’t fix Algeria’s oil woes,” *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, 13 March 2015. “Le fonds de régulation des recettes s’épuisera dès la fin de l’été 2016, selon des experts”, *Maghreb Emergent*, 5 March 2016.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior oil company analyst, Algiers, June 2015. “World Shale Resource Assessments”, EIA, 24 September 2015.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Geoff Porter, CEO, North Africa Risk Consulting, June 2016.

Industry specialists also say improvements in management, anti-corruption measures and red-tape reduction could raise conventional gas and oil production enough to make up for lower oil prices, with less political impact than developing unconventional sources such as shale.¹⁶

C. *The Transformation of the South*

As oil prices and production have dropped, so too has the state's ability to buy social peace, but banking on a rentier system, even when it functions smoothly, could prove risky. Excessive reliance on rent redistribution alone can obscure reasons for discontent and demands for justice, equality and dignity.¹⁷ Generous patronage might temporarily satisfy enough people to calm an upsurge of resentment but is at best a temporary solution as the economy worsens – especially when jihadists in neighbouring states have proven adept at exploiting social crises and even more adept at exploiting the inadequate, often heavy-handed government responses to them. The south's sense of exclusion ultimately can be solved only through better representation and integration at the national level, recognition of region-specific needs and challenges and a more equitable distribution of resources.

The south is undergoing a far-reaching transformation, propelled by almost 2 per cent annual population growth nationally, rapid urbanisation (69 per cent of the population was rural at independence; 70 per cent live in cities today) and rising expectations born of education and the internet.¹⁸ The region has just 10 per cent of the total population but 36 per cent of the country's impoverished municipalities.¹⁹

Further complicating social dynamics is the south's ethnic composition, which includes significant ethno-linguistic Amazigh communities such as Tuaregs, Ouaraglis and Mozabites.²⁰ The national ruling party, the Front National de Libération (FLN) has long pursued a policy of co-opting traditional political and religious leaderships of southern groups, such as *zaouiyas* (Sufi brotherhoods), Tuareg *amenoukals* (traditional tribal and regional chiefs) and the organised Mozabite political leadership known as the *majlis al-qurthi*. Local administration in the southern provinces, perceived to favour Arabs and co-opted Amazigh elites, tends to be run by northerners.²¹ Co-opting elites creates the appearance of inclusion but tends to spread resources narrowly; many socially influential southerners, including urban youths, unionists and even traditional elites, feel outsiders run their lives according to their own priorities.

Occasional protests, strikes and violence in the north in the 1970s and 1980s demanding economic and minority rights peaked with the October 1988 riots over rising prices, unemployment and austerity. Contestation faded in the 1990s, as the

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior foreign oil company adviser, Algiers, June 2015.

¹⁷ Naoual Belakhdar, "l'Eveil du Sud' ou quand la contestation vient de la marge", *Politique africaine*, no. 137, March 2015, pp. 27-48.

¹⁸ "National Report on Housing for the Conference on Housing", République Algérienne démocratique et populaire, July 2014. The expansion of education and infrastructure in the 1970s, combined with sedentarisation policies and population transfers, set the stage for the glut of unemployed graduates in Ouargla and spread oil and gas expertise in In Salah.

¹⁹ Luis Martinez and Rasmus Alenius Boserup (eds), *Algeria Modern* (London, 2016), p. 24.

²⁰ Numbers are unclear because the state abolished ethnic categories in the 1966 census.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, local residents, Ghardaia, Ouargla, In Salah, May 2015, May 2016.

security crisis overshadowed social questions.²² It resurfaced in the south over the first decade and a half of the present century, however, when the newly formed Mouvement des Enfants du Sud pour la Justice (MSJ) demanded solutions for unemployment and regional inequality, putting southern concerns, for the first time, on the national map; the Comité National pour la Défense des Droits des Chômeurs (CNDDC) formed in Ouargla after a decade's incubation; citizens in In Salah launched a national movement against fracking, sparking protests in Algiers, Oran, Constantine and across southern cities; and intercommunal fighting in Ghardaia led to the first-ever strike of security forces in Algiers, who marched on the president's office.

The sustained if sporadic unrest at these sites suggests the emergence of specifically southern political dynamics. Governance shortcomings in the oil-rich zones are felt particularly forcefully. The south – far less populated, far more strategically important in terms of natural resources and far more difficult to control given its geography – has replaced northern regions like Kabylie as the epicentre of contestation. Its grievances are tightly wound social, economic, political and environmental concerns, in part specific to their communities, in part reflective of national sentiment, particularly resentment of a rentier state in crisis.

²² Belakhdar, “l'Eveil du Sud”, op. cit.

III. Southern Unrest: Three Case Studies

The coincidence of unrest at In Salah, Ouargla and Ghardaia, particularly given relative calm elsewhere, demonstrates the centrality of the Sahara to peace and security in Algeria today.²³ While top officials tend to depict southern activists as separatists, they are fighting, in different ways, for more inclusion and voice in the state.²⁴ Fueling the protest movements in Ouargla and In Salah are demands for greater benefits from the extraction of natural resources – what an analyst calls “resource regionalism” – as well as environmental concerns.²⁵ Exclusionary politics and weak governance in a resource-rich zone helped enflame tensions in Ghardaia, where they manifested as intercommunal conflict.

The crisis in Ghardaia is distinct in that it weaves the issue of ethnic and religious minorities together with political and economic concerns felt elsewhere in the south.²⁶ The Mozabites of the Mزاب Valley, Amazigh followers of the Ibadi school, say they face structural discrimination in Arabisation policies as well as attacks on their homes, religious symbols and businesses by Arab Maliki groups.²⁷ Their historical demographic predominance in the Mزاب Valley has been undermined by a rapid population shift since the 1980s, in part due to state settlement of Arab tribes and designation of Ghardaia as the provincial capital in 1985. This, they say, multiplied official administrative posts that were filled primarily by Arabs and deepened class tensions, pitting relatively wealthy urban Mozabites against poor Bedouin Arabs who used the Arab national parties and their influence for social mobility.²⁸ More recently, *takfiri* preachers in the region have accentuated the stigmatisation of Mozabites as “Shia apostates”, justifying violent attacks on them.²⁹

²³ Crisis Group interview, Dida Badi, research director, National Centre for Prehistoric, Anthropological and Historical Research, Algiers, May 2015. Nevertheless, while the nucleus of sustained unrest has transferred to the south, an official gendarmerie report recorded 429 “disturbances to the public order” during 2016’s second trimester (a five-a-day average), with interventions in northern urban centres such as Medea, Algiers, Boumerdes, Blida, Annaba and Skikda. “La gendarmerie s’inquiète d’une situation sociale qui reste préoccupante”, TSA, 8 August 2016.

²⁴ “[Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal] accuses us of being separatists. We won’t negotiate with him ...”. See “Ouargla: les organisateurs de la marche du 14 mars refusent de rencontrer l’envoyé spécial de Sellal”, *Algerie-focus.com*, 11 March 2013.

²⁵ “If resource nationalism was about states insisting on greater benefits from the extraction of the natural resources by foreign firms, then resource regionalism is about local communities demanding greater benefit from those same industries but at the expense of the central state”. Geoff Porter, “The new resource regionalism in North Africa and the Sahara”, *Dossiers du CERI*, Centre de recherches internationales, July 2013.

²⁶ The “Berber spring” was a period of activism in the Kabylie region and Algiers in 1980 that was violently put down by the military.

²⁷ Algeria’s Mozabites are the founders of a 1,000-year-old pentapolis (a five-city aggregation that includes Ghardaia, Beni Isguen, El-Ateuf, Melika and Bounoura, and subsumes as well the more recently established Berriane and Guerrara) 600km south of Algiers. On allegations of discrimination against Mozabites, see below.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Mozabite residents, Ghardaia, May 2015. Nacer Djabi, “Solving the tensions in Algeria’s Ghardaia region”, Arab Reform Initiative, July 2015.

²⁹ *Takfir* is the act of a Muslim declaring another Muslim to be a *kaffir* (unbeliever). Takfiris are radical Islamists (including most contemporary Sunni jihadist groups) who practice *takfir*, often to sanction lethal violence against other Muslims that otherwise would violate a Quranic injunction. Some takfiris erroneously consider Ibadis to be Shia.

A. Ghardaia

1. Ethno-sectarian conflict: Mozabites vs Arabs

Since 2013, local flare-ups between Mozabites and Arabs have been quick to ignite and nearly impossible to extinguish.³⁰ Ghardaia province (*wilaya*) has a dozen towns and some 360,000 residents. In October 2015, after hundreds of riot police were stationed there for ten months under difficult conditions, they returned to the capital and, with others who remained in Ghardaia and a few dozen in Oran, launched the country's first-ever strike by security forces, demanding improved working conditions and an end to long deployments.³¹ When those in Algiers marched to the presidency's El Mouradia palace, they found themselves in a standoff with the presidential guard. Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal met with them that evening, promising to respond to their demands, though not their leading one, the departure of police chief Major-General Abdelghani Hamel.

The escalation between Mozabite and Arab groups began in November 2013, when 150 people were arrested during clashes over a football match in Guerrara, 100km north east of Ghardaia. Neutral observers supported the Mozabite perception that security forces intervened on the Arab side.³² The next month, Mozabite protesters shut down Ghardaia's centre, demanding that authorities divulge public housing and land allotments. After the police reopened the area, the Mozabite businesses there were burned, leading to more reprisals and counter-reprisals. In the end, fifteen people were killed, mostly Mozabites.³³

For the next two years, amid sporadic deadly violence, the community's mixed neighbourhoods self-segregated. Long-term residents were driven out by neighbours' threats and their own fears. Mozabites and Arabs who ventured from their streets or neighbourhood risked danger; only Sub-Saharan migrants, seen as neutral, could confidently cross the invisible boundaries. Armed with knives and Molotov cocktails, Mozabites formed self-defence groups and filmed and distributed videos of police sheltering Arab protesters, proof, they say, of authorities' bias.³⁴

³⁰ Outbreaks have occurred in Ghardaia, Berriane and Guerrara. The current violence broke out in 2013, but clashes date to 1985, when land in Ghardaia belonging almost entirely to Mozabites was appropriated and distributed to Arabs as part of the sedentarisation process of extending control over remote and often nomadic southern populations.

³¹ The Compagnies républicaines de sécurité (CRS) riot police unit was responsible for the strike, demanding better working conditions, the right to unionise and departure of the managing director of the Direction générale de la sécurité nationale (DGSN), Major-General Abdelghani Hamel.

³² Crisis Group interviews, Mozabite activists, local journalists, Ghardaia and Algiers, May 2015; Ghardaia, May 2016.

³³ Mozabites say the *wilaya* security head, Abdelhak Bouraoui, is clearly visible in a cellphone video of the desecration of a Mozabite cemetery and destruction of the mausoleum of the Mozabite Sheikh Ammi Said, a UNESCO world heritage site sacred to Mozabites. See ImazighenLibya, [youtube.com/watch?v=kyUhro_FAzo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyUhro_FAzo), YouTube, 6 February 2014 and [mzab europe youtube.com/watch?v=i7N21EonsQI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7N21EonsQI), YouTube, 14 April 2014.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Ghardaia, June 2015. "We started forming self-defence groups when we noticed our houses were being burned, and the police intervened on the side of the Arabs". Crisis Group interview, Mozabite self-defence group leader, Ghardaia, May 2015. He said dozens of neighbourhood patrols have since formed, and even high school students had units with light weapons. "En Algérie, Ghardaïa enflammée par les violences communautaires", *Le Monde*, 19 February 2014.

Violence crested in 2015. In June, at Ramadan, Arabs threw Molotov cocktails into a car in Berriane, leaving four Mozabites gravely burned. The next month, dozens on both sides were killed and hundreds wounded in less than a week. The military was deployed to contain the situation, but by then thousands of homes and businesses had been burned and schools closed for long stretches.³⁵

2. Intra-communal differences

Tensions highlighted differences not just between the two communities, but within them as well. As social and economic conditions have worsened, Mozabite elites – who form highly structured, interlocking spiritual, political, tribal and neighbourhood networks – have lost traction with the community's youth.³⁶ Traditional authorities, unable to protect their people and seen as co-opted by the state, are losing ground to fiery activists like Fekhar Kameleddine, the doctor-turned-activist who founded the Mouvement pour l'Autonomie du Mzab and wrote the UN Secretary-General denouncing an "ethnic cleansing" campaign by the Algerian state.³⁷

Many Mozabite youth, framing their predicament in communal terms, have concluded their only realistic option is to fight back.³⁸ This contrasts with the community's traditional conservative bodies such as the Majlis al-Qurthi, the regional council that maintains strong links to the state, has called for calm and explains the climate of insecurity as a product less of ethnic violence than the breakdown of law and order. Explaining its preference to negotiate, a member said:

It's not our point of view that these are inter-community incidents. There are repeated attacks by organised criminal mafias. But we have tried first on our side, aware that most of the damages suffered has been on our side, to take a moment to reflect and observe. And we reminded the state of its duty according to the constitution to preserve the security of citizens and their goods.³⁹

While the council claims satisfaction with how the state is handling the situation, a member recently left his house of 40 years in the once-mixed, now self-segregating Ghardaia neighbourhood of Tahnia el-Makhzen after Arabs ransacked it and lamented: "All we can do is to swallow the indignity and smile".⁴⁰

Arab communities are also fragmenting, though differently. Compared with Mozabites, the Arabs of the Ghardaia region lack unifying structures. They are an

³⁵ "Ghardaia: nouvelles échauffourées entre jeunes à Berriane", Algérie Press Service, 17 June 2015. The most intense, sustained fighting was in mixed neighbourhoods such as Thienniet al-Makhzen and Hajj Massoud, and around the al-Qurthi housing block, which 1,000 Arab residents could access only via a Mozabite area, where they were pelted with rocks and Molotov cocktails.

³⁶ There are roughly 200 tribal groupings in the Mozabite community, split among seven main cities – the Ghardaia pentapolis plus Guerrara and Berriane – each with a tribal authority (*majmua ashair*) responsible for social issues such as education. The Majlis al-Qurthi groups together elites of the seven cities and serves as the political interface with the Algerian authorities.

³⁷ "Appel de détresse et demande d'intervention urgente!!", open letter to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon by Dr Kameleddine Fekhar, 3 July 2015, as published by siwel.info.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Mozabite self-defence groups, Ghardaia, June 2015. Pro-Amazigh websites like siwel.info and tamazgha.fr portray Mozabites as facing campaigns of eradication; some Facebook groups openly incite violence.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Majlis al-Qurthi leadership, Ghardaia, May 2015.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, members of Majlis al-Qurthi, Ghardaia, May 2015.

amalgamation of regional tribes – the Chaamba, Medebi, Said and Mokhadema – in addition to economic immigrants from elsewhere in Algeria. On the whole, they are becoming more Salafi, with some militant elements among them.⁴¹ Incitement to violence came from, for instance, Ahmed Seqlab, a young, Saudi-trained preacher from Berriane with a significant online following. Also, the privately-owned Saudi satellite television channel Iqraa, popular among Algerian Salafis, broadcast a *fatwa* from an Algerian cleric declaring Ibadis “enemies of Allah”.⁴²

Arab antipathy for their Mozabite neighbours has other sources, too. Having long ago settled in cities, built trade links and invested in education, Mozabites tend to be more commercially successful. They also benefit from certain exclusive minority rights; their private schools and mosques, for instance, are not subject to state control of teaching and content, unlike those of Arabs. Yet overall, Arabs tend to feel represented by the Algerian state.⁴³ In this sense, Mozabite cultural autonomy is less something for Arabs to emulate than a threat to be contained, and the state is an ally in doing so. An Arab community leader said:

Mozabites who pass through private schools have complexes against Arabs. The Ibadis call themselves the only group that is on the right path; they consider themselves superior. The state should put these schools under its control.⁴⁴

3. A confused response

Neither local nor national authorities have been able to negotiate an end to the impasse. Appeals for peaceful dialogue by traditional Mozabite and Arab authorities failed to stem the violence, and national authorities have yet to respond to calls by Arabs, Mozabites and parliament for an official public investigation into the clashes. Calm was restored only with the militarisation of the province, which in July 2015 was placed under the authority of Major General Abderrazak Cherif.⁴⁵ However, the deployment of thousands of police, gendarmes and soldiers is at best a temporary solution. At worst, it risks creating more violence, as evidenced by clashes between police and Arabs in Arab-majority neighbourhoods, and between gendarmes and Mozabites in mixed neighbourhoods like al-Qurthi.

Political parties, in capitalising on the growing sectarianism, have worsened it. The city's FLN, the national ruling party, has long been dominated by the powerful Chaamba Arab community, which combines Arab nationalist and cultural identities with sometimes thuggish behaviour.⁴⁶ Radicals have weakened traditional Mozabite elites who have sided with the moderate mainstream discourse of the second ruling party, Rassemblement National Démocratique (RND).⁴⁷ Fekhar Kameleddine, for

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Dida Badi, research director, National Centre for Prehistoric, Anthropological and Historical Research, Algiers, May 2015.

⁴² “Message to the Algerian government”, www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MXJD35U3SY. “Ghardaia: les tenants et aboutissements d’une fitna organisée”, *Algerie-Focus.com*, 9 July 2015.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Moustapha Rebbahi, Arab professor of sociology, University of Ghardaia, Ghardaia, June 2015.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Arab community leader, Ghardaia, June 2015.

⁴⁵ “Algerie – La wilaya de Ghardaia passe sous l’autorité de l’Armée”, *Canal Algérie*, 8 July 2015.

⁴⁶ A Ghardaia-based source recalled local FLN politicians turning a blind eye to Arab-led expropriation of Mozabite land. Crisis Group interview, Algerian journalist, Ghardaia, May 2015.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, members of the Majlis al-Qurthi, Ghardaia, May 2015.

instance, established ties to the Front des Forces Socialistes (FFS), a historical pro-Amazigh opposition party, before founding his own militant separatist movement. Only Islamist parties – Nahda and the Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix (MSP, the Algerian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood) – span the communal divide and count members of each among their ranks.⁴⁸

Accusations of responsibility for the chaos flourish. The government has sought to pin the blame on various outsiders: Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal, President Bouteflika's chef de cabinet, Ahmed Ouyahia, and Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra have blamed Morocco for stirring up trouble, while Religious Affairs Minister Mohamed Aïssa attributed the violence to a Salafi conspiracy.⁴⁹ Mozabites say the government has stoked fears and created discord to keep Bouteflika in power and perpetuate his camp's control, pointing to the promotion of several security officials who presided over periods of chaos in Ghardaia. Still others from Mozabite and Arab camps, trying to show that his promises to maintain stability are hollow, allude to a DRS conspiracy to stoke violence in Ghardaia.⁵⁰

Such theories underestimate the complex roots of communal conflict. Though national and regional factors ought not to be discounted, local causes are more important, among which Mozabite lack of trust in the authorities and the secrecy of government operations figure prominently. As a first step, the authorities should publicly investigate the clashes, especially the role security forces may have played.

B. *In Salah*

1. From a peaceful grassroots movement ...

There was little reason to think In Salah, 1,200km south of Algiers, with fewer than 40,000 inhabitants, would become the centre of a nationwide environmental movement. In December 2014, the day after Energy Minister Yousef Yousfi announced Algeria's first successful shale drilling test, 30km from In Salah, some 5,000 townsfolk occupied the central square, Sahat Soumoud, and closed roads. The town, like the rest of the country, learned of the drilling from the news; even local officials had not been informed. Mobilisation was spontaneous, the result of high levels of education, particularly about the hydrocarbons sector; a traditional environmental consciousness, especially among women; and social media forums like Facebook, which spread information on fracking risks.⁵¹ That the authorities permitted the French company Total to test unconventional extraction techniques outlawed in France was met with acute resentment in In Salah, partly because the area previously had been

⁴⁸ The Ghardaia mayor is an Ibadi member of the Islamist Green Alliance coalition, for instance.

⁴⁹ "Ghardaia: Lamamra prend le relais de Sellal et Ouyahia pour accuser le Maroc", www.yabiladi.com, 1 August 2015; "Un pays frère a financé ce qui s'est passé à Ghardaia' selon Sellal", www.algerie1.com, 12 July 2015; "Ghardaia: Mohamed Aïssa met en cause des salafistes extrémistes liés à l'école yéménite de Dammaj", Huffington Post Algeria, 19 July 2015.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Mozabites, Ghardaia, May 2015.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Mohamed Belamine, parliamentarian, Front National pour la Justice Sociale, May 2015. Two of the movement's most vocal leaders, Hacina Zegzag and Fatiha Touni, led the town's women in marches and sit-ins and spoke with the press. Women, traditionally tasked to provide water in Saharan societies, are especially sensitive to fracking's potential to pollute groundwater. The U.S. documentary "Gasland", in which a woman holding a lighter under her faucet triggers a gas explosion, was widely disseminated on social networks.

used as a laboratory for testing new and dangerous technology, including French nuclear weapons in the 1960s.⁵²

The night the test drill was announced a local Sonatrach engineer and renewable energy activist, Abdelkader Bouhafs, organised students and geology, hydrogeology and drilling engineers to go door-to-door warning households that fracking would pollute the water table.⁵³ These activists, most of whom worked in the hydrocarbons sector, subsequently formed the “Committee of 22”, which steered and represented the thousands who turned out the next day at Sahat Soumoud. The atmosphere was joyful and family friendly, with men, women and children reading poetry and singing and volunteers in yellow vests leading hundreds through the streets. The gathering became the nucleus of the anti-shale drilling movement, drawing support from elsewhere in the country.⁵⁴

By contrast, *zaouias*, Sufi brotherhoods with strong religious, cultural and political influence in the area, have refused to take a position on shale gas, cementing their image as co-opted by state patrons.⁵⁵ Their retreat on the highly politicised issue has opened space for others: activists have encouraged proactive use of conventional and social media – long feared as instruments of meddling, foreign and domestic – to spread the idea that activism, including with civil disobedience, can block government policy.⁵⁶ New information and communications technologies were instrumental both in coordinating actions and building support within the south and nationally: after the first In Salah protests, solidarity protests occurred in Tamanrasset, Timimoune, Metlili, Adrar, Touggourt, Ghardaia and Ouargla, which share common traditions, family relations and dependence on the same water aquifer, as well, further north, in Tizi Ouzou, Bejaia and eventually Algiers.

2. ... to violence and politicisation

Surprised by the immediacy and intensity of the popular response, the government dispatched Energy Minister Yousfi to appease the Committee of 22, without success. Participants, many themselves experts in various facets of natural resource extrac-

⁵² Total acquired a 47 per cent stake in the Ahnet basin in 2009. Officially, Sonatrach undertook the pilot shale gas drilling project, but Total's involvement was an open secret and confirmed when it announced in January 2015 it had not been at the site since June 2014. “Total Algérie: Nous n'avons jamais eu de licence de gaz de schiste”, *Algerie-Focus.com*, 3 March 2015. Hydraulic fracturing has been banned in France since 2011, due to public pressure fuelled by environmental concerns. See Tara Patel, “The French public says no to ‘le fracking’”, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 31 March 2011.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Hacina Zegzag, founding member, Committee for a National Moratorium on Shale Gas, Adrar, June 2015.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, “Rassemblement anti-gaz de schiste à Alger”, 17 January 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVuJ-w8397s.

⁵⁵ In the late 1980s, Algeria went from repressing to reviving *zaouias* in an effort to co-opt them. “The official portrayal is remarkably simplistic and essentialist: the *zaouias* are portrayed as ‘sanctuaries of peace’, allegedly ‘unchanged for centuries’, ‘remote from worldly affairs’ and ‘profoundly apolitical’. However, both the state's instrumentalisation of them as well as the *zaouias*' proper interests and activities stand in stark contrast to such ascriptions”. Isabelle Werenfels, “Promoting the ‘good Islam’: the regime and Sufi brotherhoods in Algeria”, *Eurasia Review*, 12 September 2011.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Mohad Gasmi, anti-shale gas protest leader, Adrar, June 2015. A dozen prominent anti-shale gas and anti-unemployment leaders attended 2013 training by Laghouat CNDDC co-founder and activist Yacine Zaid on using information technologies and interacting with media. “Our activism is not centralised, but each of us benefited from this training”. *Ibid.*

tion, felt him condescending, especially because, they say, he questioned their grasp of fracking basics. After the sit-ins and marches continued peacefully for another two months, President Bouteflika sent a delegation to In Salah, led by national police chief Abdelghani Hamel. That too ended with failure, when he responded to the Committee of 22's call to stop exploratory drilling (as a condition for further talks) by listing the security risks the country faces. Days later, Prime Minister Sellal's assurances on state television that fracking was in a strictly exploratory phase and no exploitation license had been granted led protests to swell, since activists were demanding a moratorium on all fracking.⁵⁷

A moratorium was the central demand of an unauthorised march by the political opposition in Algiers on 24 February 2015, the 44th anniversary of the nationalisation of natural resources.⁵⁸ It figured prominently again on 14 March with the some 8,000 demonstrators at Ouargla's second *millioniya* (literally "million-man march", a term popularised by the 2011 Arab uprisings).⁵⁹

The Committee of 22 succeeded for two months to keep protests peaceful. Demonstrators warmly greeted and gave cigarettes, shade and cool drinks to the hundreds of police dispatched from the north to monitor the square.⁶⁰ But frustrated by officials' non-committal response and encouraged by the wider support they enjoyed, protesters at In Salah four days after the February Algiers opposition event more confrontationally tried to close the access road to a second exploratory drilling site for shale gas Sonatrach and Halliburton managed 10km north of the town. This led to the first violent clashes with security forces. Gendarmes fired teargas and live ammunition, wounding three protestors seriously, and set fire to the tent encampment in Sahat Soumoud.⁶¹

The Algiers protest brought another development unwelcome in the south. During its first two months, the movement there had more or less remained above the political fray.⁶² Wary of being co-opted by the main opposition political parties and sceptical of their intentions since they had not opposed the 2013 hydrocarbons law authorising shale gas exploitation, leaders characterised their movement as purely social.⁶³ It became harder to maintain that line after the 24 February event in the

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, anti-shale gas protest leaders Mohad Gasmi and Hacina Zegzag, Adrar, June 2015. "Gaz de schiste: le DGSN Abdelghani Hamel quitte In Salah sans régler le problème", *El Watan*, 18 January 2015. "Quand Sellal fait flamber In Salah", *Liberté*, 23 January 2015.

⁵⁸ On the anniversary of the 1971 nationalisation of resources, political opposition coalitions Instance de suivi et de coordination de l'opposition (ISCO) and Coordination nationale pour les libertés et la transition démocratique (CNLTD) defied the protest ban and marched through the capital with slogans linking anti-fracking mobilisation to their democratic-transition demands.

⁵⁹ "Des milliers des personnes au sit-in d'Ouargla", www.leconews.com, 14 March 2015. Slogans included "Non au gaz de schiste" ("no to shale gas"), "samidoun, samidoun, lil ghaz essakhri raffidoun" ("steadfast, steadfast, we will remain steadfast against shale gas"), "la shamal, la janoub, el-jazair fil quloub" ("no north, no south, Algeria is in everyone's heart"), and "el-wihda wa essiyada, li-iqqaf el-ghaz essakhri" ("unity and sovereignty, for a stop to shale gas").

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Mohad Gasmi, Hacina Zegzag, anti-shale gas protest leaders, Adrar, June 2015.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, witnesses, Adrar, June 2015.

⁶² A popular slogan was, "No political parties and no politicisation of the movement". Crisis Group interview, Mohad Gasmi, anti-shale gas protest leader, Adrar, May 2015.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, anti-shale gas activists, Adrar, June 2015. "Loi no. 13-01 ...", *Journal Officiel De La République Algérienne* no. 11, 24 February 2013.

capital, as activists allied more broadly with opposition parties, linking their cause with wider criticisms of national governance.⁶⁴

The authorities eventually quelled the protests by intimidating and co-opting the Committee of 22.⁶⁵ According to several activists, committee leader Bouhafs, threatened and detained near the Libyan border, returned docile and defeated, though he has continued his ecological activism.⁶⁶ Energy Minister Yousfi, on 23 February 2015, announced the creation of an independent, albeit state-funded, observatory at In Salah, where many committee members, including Bouhafs, were offered senior posts. The observatory has not however been implemented. Others obtained jobs or promotions at the Sonatrach subsidiary Naftal, the pro-regime TV station Ennahar or in the *wilaya* of Tamanrasset.⁶⁷

With the committee defunct, pressure on the government to change direction on shale gas evaporated. It has not replied officially to the moratorium demand.⁶⁸ Oil industry executives affirm that shale gas activity was never suspended, and President Bouteflika came out clearly for exploitation when he described shale gas, alongside oil, conventional gas and renewable energies, as “gifts from God”.⁶⁹

Yet, what activism did not accomplish, the high cost of production and the oil-price crash have. In January 2016, *El Khabar* revealed that faced with rising costs and decreasing revenue, Sonatrach had decided to suspend shale gas production pending a price return to \$80 per barrel. (Crude-oil has not exceeded \$60 per barrel since November 2014; in the first nine months of 2016, the price hovered between \$30 and \$50 per barrel.) The government is, however, preparing for that day: Prime Minister Sellal, meeting his Russian counterpart, Dimitri Medvedev, on 27 April 2016, offered cooperation with Russia's Gazprom on shale gas.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ “The fact that the government is not responding to our demands means that it is the population's right to use the opposition to assert its rights”. Crisis Group interview, Mohad Gasmi, anti-shale gas protest leader, Adrar, June 2015.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Hacina Zegzag, founding member, Committee for a National Moratorium on Shale Gas, Adrar, June 2015. She added: “I don't think they left [the square] because of the jobs. I think they left because they were afraid. They were pressured effectively”.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, anti-shale gas protest leaders, Adrar, June 2015. Crisis Group email correspondence, Abdelkader Bouhafs, November 2016.

⁶⁷ “Gaz de schiste: vers la creation d'une Observatoire independent”, *El Watan*, 24 February 2015. Crisis Group interviews, anti-shale gas protest leaders, Adrar, June 2015. Bouhafs did not accept any post or promotion and continues to oppose shale gas exploitation including through publications online. Crisis Group email correspondence, Abdelkader Bouhafs, November 2016.

⁶⁸ “The statement that fracking was frozen, that they would stop drilling and fracking, evaluate potential and decide by 2019 whether or not to pursue, was false, an attempt to calm the population. In reality, production is still scheduled for 2022”. Crisis Group interview, Algerian legal counsel for multinational oil company, Algiers, September 2015. The government has issued contradictory statements on the future of shale gas drilling and replaced Yousfi soon after the protests. The Collectif national pour un moratoire sur les gaz de schiste, a splinter movement of the committee, has used meetings and social media to keep up pressure for a moratorium.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior foreign oil company adviser, November 2015. “Bouteflika: ‘Le gaz de schiste est un don de Dieu’”, www.algeriepatriotique.com, 24 February 2015.

⁷⁰ “Algérie: Sonatrach suspend l'exploitation du gaz de schiste”, Radio France Internationale (RFI), 21 January 2016. “The Algerians suspended shale gas not because they care [about environmental effects] but because it's not profitable. Companies think [they] will eventually go ahead with shale gas when the price is right”. Crisis Group interview, Geoff Porter, CEO North Africa Risk Consulting, June 2016. “Algeria could cooperate with Russia's Gazprom on shale gas”, Sputniknews.com, 27 April 2016.

C. *Ouargla: The Movement of the Unemployed*

1. The men behind the *millioniya*

The largest southern demonstrations have been in Ouargla, a strategically important town of about 140,000 near the major oil fields of Hassi Messaoud and gas fields of Hassi Rmmel that hosts a military base for the central and north-east Saharan zone. Grievances there have mixed in ways difficult to disaggregate and no easier to solve. These include rapid population growth, agricultural decline and decreasing cross-border commerce following closure of the borders with Libya, Tunisia and Mali due to security concerns. They have inflamed a countrywide socio-economic crisis that is worse in the south, where unofficial unemployment rates are as high as 30 per cent, especially among youth.⁷¹

The anti-government mood around the Arab world in 2011 found fertile ground in this environment. Among the first manifestations was the Ouargla-based, largely male CNDDC youth movement. Its leaders transcend the party lines that typically pit Islamists against secular activists. Its most visible leader, Taher Belabbes, a ten-year veteran activist, recruited Yacine Zaid, a trade union and human rights activist in his 40s, and Khencha Belqacem, an Islamist dedicated to broad-based social organising.⁷² The group sought, with fair success, to build a peaceful and inclusive movement, with wide support among liberals, Islamists and students. They united around shared beliefs that unemployment was driving southerners toward fatalism, religious radicalism and extreme acts; handouts might temporarily assuage but not eliminate grievances; the state's economic mismanagement had created dependency for southerners, not opportunities; and the south was a "disgraced territory" due to extreme neglect in comparison with the north.⁷³

On 8 June 2011, several hundred protesters clashed with security forces in Ouargla, after several months of peaceful protests, sit-ins, suicides and self-immolations there and in Hassi Messaoud brought no official response. More clashes broke out six months later 260km away in Laghouat, between security forces and residents denouncing unemployment, public-housing corruption and hiring practices said to favour northerners. The CNDDC led southerners, for the first time in memory, to demand a say in distribution of national resources and call on the government to account for its economic policies.⁷⁴

By 2013, the CNDDC's mobilising capacity had grown. On 14 March, between 5,000 and 10,000 protesters assembled in front of Ouargla's city hall for a *millioniya* carrying flags and banners and shouting slogans demanding jobs and development of the south. Belabbes said:

With [the *millioniya*] we were seizing our right to protest and express ourselves publicly ... all across Algeria, with the exception of Algiers, which remains to be conquered. It was also our response to the slanderous and insulting declarations of the prime minister, Abdelmalek Sellal, and of Daho Ould Kablia, then interior minister. The people of the south will always remember this unfortunate phrase

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, labour expert, Algiers, March 2014. Officially, unemployment fell from 30 per cent in 2000 to 11.2 per cent in 2015, according to the National Office of Statistics (ONS).

⁷² Crisis Group interview, Yacine Zaid, 12 August 2016.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, CNDDC activist, Ouargla, May 2015.

⁷⁴ Luis Martinez, "Algérie: le calme avant la tempête?", *Le Monde*, 10 January 2012.

of Sellal who described the young unemployed as *chirdhima* [insignificant] or minor terrorist groups. The outrageous words of Ould Kablia who spoke of “neutralising” the protests and controlling the security situation in the south in order to protect oil installations still resonate in my ears.⁷⁵

The 2013 *millioniya*, which went off peacefully in the presence of security forces, led the state to take the protests seriously, implementing a series of emergency measures.⁷⁶ Leaders felt they had established the movement as an interlocutor for local and national authorities on resource distribution in the south.⁷⁷ However as with other protest movements in the south, their hopes were soon disappointed. Deep reform – rooting out corruption and nepotism in hiring and effective training for lucrative local jobs in the oil and gas industry – never materialised. Leadership schisms weakened the movement and slowed its momentum.⁷⁸ Perhaps most important was the constant surveillance, harassment and intimidation of organisers, whom the media, with no evidence, accused of drug or alcohol addiction, acting as foreign agents and secretly pursuing southern autonomy.

By 2015, Belabbes had left the leadership and Zaid the country, and Belqacem was in prison.⁷⁹ The CNDDC had grown so weak by that year's *millioniya* that the national political opposition, which shared the regime's tendency to disregard local

⁷⁵ “Je démissionne pour couper court aux subterfuges du gouvernement”, Taher Belabbes, ex porte-parole de la Coordination nationale de défense des droits des chômeurs”, *El Watan*, 21 February 2014.

⁷⁶ Sellal ordered emergency measures: making zero-interest development-oriented bank loans available in the south, pressure on foreign and domestic contractors as well as national agencies to recruit locally and raising public-employee salaries. Belakhdar, “L'Eveil du Sud”, op. cit. The governor received and offered jobs, mostly in the gendarmerie, to a delegation of unemployed.

⁷⁷ Protesters said that after the event they had more self-respect and felt that by challenging those perceiving them as docile, insignificant or criminal, they had begun to play a productive role in society. Crisis Group interview, Ouargla, June 2013. Belakhdar, “L'Eveil du Sud”, op. cit.

⁷⁸ A centre created in 2014 demonstrated training shortcomings: Sonatrach hired none of the 40 trainees who completed the first six-month course; only twelve found jobs. The second class of 30 was still unemployed six months after training. “Ouargla à bout de patience”, *El Watan*, 13 March 2015. Crisis Group interviews, Ouargla, May 2013. Belabbes began denouncing political and military figures and demanding more radical change on the national level. Zaid focused on the CNDDC itself and local goals.

⁷⁹ Starting in 2011, Belabbes was summoned for questioning and beaten. In January 2013, he was sentenced to one month in prison for unauthorised gathering and breach of state security. “Taher Belabbes interpellé par les RG de Batna”, *Quotidien d'Algérie*, 17 October 2011; “les policiers frappé Taher Belabbes”, Syndicat national autonome des personnels de l'administration publique (SN-APAP), www.youtube.com/watch?v=LccYnGIC7jY, 4 May 2011; communiqué de SNAPAP, 7 January 2013, www.algeria-watch.org/fr/mrv/mrvrap/snapap_arrestation_belabbes.htm. In October 2012, Zaid was given a suspended six-month sentence for assault of a security agent. In 2014, he fled the country after threats against himself and his family. “Yacine Zaid condamné à six mois de prison avec sursis”, *Le Matin d'Algérie*, 8 October 2012; Crisis Group interview, Zaid, Laghouat, 2014. Belqacem was arrested in January 2015. The First Instance Tribunal of Laghouat sentenced him and eight other leaders of the unemployed movement to prison terms from twelve to eighteen months for “unauthorised gathering” after they protested for an independent judiciary before the Ouargla tribunal. Months after release, he received another six months for a Facebook video criticising imprisonment of a fellow activist. “Algeria: prison for criticizing judiciary”, Human Rights Watch, 7 June 2016.

concerns, was able to co-opt the event, diluting its unemployment and anti-fracking messages to focus instead on democratic transition.⁸⁰

2. Security risks of mishandling the “southern question”

Repression in Ouargla, a constant since 2011, has led some activists to embrace extreme measures. In February 2013, days after police arrested more than a dozen CNDDC activists who had come together in Laghouat to burn their diplomas in front of the employment agency, clashes broke out between security forces and demonstrators gathered in solidarity with detained colleagues. More recently, protestors have adopted new and disturbing tactics, such as stitching their mouths shut and cutting their arms and chests.⁸¹

The path of a previous generation of leaders should give the government pause before ignoring local demands. The MSJ, founded in 2004 by Abdesslam Tarmoune and Lamine Bencheneb to demand economic opportunities and improved wealth distribution in the south, is a cautionary tale. After nearly a decade of unfruitful peaceful protest, it split into a faction (CNDDC) that stayed mostly peaceful and two radicalised factions that took up arms. Bencheneb's faction collaborated with Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Mourabitoun group to plan and execute the attack on the In Amenas gas complex in the south in January 2013; Tarmoune fled to the maquis and threatened to violently restore southern youths' “usurped rights”.⁸²

Continued failure to engage with and effectively respond to southerners' demands is particularly dangerous given the proliferation of jihadist groups and the smuggling networks that sometimes assist them. Beyond the January 2013 In Amenas attack, AQIM claimed responsibility for an 18 March 2016 rocket attack on the British Petroleum (BP) - and Statoil-operated Krechba gas facility in In Salah province. AQIM's statement claiming responsibility said it aimed not only to wage “war on the interests of the crusaders”, but also to protect the environment and discourage shale gas exploration – evidence that jihadist groups are attuned to and seek to exploit southern grievances.⁸³

⁸⁰ National political opposition participants included the Coordination nationale pour les libertés et la transition démocratique (CNLTD), which includes ex-Prime Minister Ahmed Benbitour and Jil Jadid (New Generation) party President Sofiane Djilali, and representatives of the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) party and the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Movement of Society for Peace (MSP).

⁸¹ “Violentes émeutes à Laghouat: les jeunes réclament du travail”, *Liberté*, 24 February 2013. “Les nouvelles formes de protestation des chômeurs à Ouargla”, *TSA*, 24 February 2016.

⁸² Hannah Armstrong, “The In Amenas attack in the context of southern Algeria's growing social unrest”, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 7, no. 2, 24 February 2014. “Enquete sur la disparition des jeunes du Sud suspectés d'avoir rejoint les rangs du MSJ”, *Echourouk Online*, 17 June 2013. On 2 February 2014, residents of the southern town of Djanet, along the Tassili n'Ajjer mountain range where Tarmoune was hiding, held a sit-in in his support, asking authorities to stop military operations and open a dialogue for his surrender. “A Djanet, on veut que l'armée dialogue avec Abdessalam Tarmoune”, *El Watan*, 7 February 2014.

⁸³ “Situation on Krechba plant in Algeria clarified”, www.statoil.com/en/NewsAndMedia/News/2016/Pages/Algerieoppdatering1803.aspx. “Algerian army kills militants behind Krechba gas plant attack: source”, *Reuters*, 20 March 2016. Clifford Krauss, “BP and Statoil pull employees from Algeria gas fields after attack”, *New York Times*, 21 March 2016. None of over 600 employees were injured.

Moreover, the Algerian Sahara, in the midst of an increasingly troubled region and connecting Libya and West Africa with Mali and Niger, is vulnerable also to flourishing networks of illicit commerce. Smuggling can attract young southerners without jobs who feel abandoned by the authorities. Arms smuggling in particular is on the rise: the army seized more large-calibre weapons between February and April 2016 than at any time since the “black decade” began in 1992.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ “Dans le sud algérien, le spectre de la radicalisation des mouvements de protestation”, *tssa-algerie.com*, 5 March 2015. “Saisies d’armes: du jamais vu dans l’histoire de l’Algérie”, *El Watan*, 15 April 2016.

IV. State Responses

A. Managing Southern Unrest

Algerian authorities are taking some measures to improve administration in the south and pursue dialogue. In May 2015 for instance, they announced an administrative redistricting, creating ten new districts, each under a delegate *wali* (provincial governor), including Ghardaia and Ouargla, as well as Tamanrasset, where In Salah is located. Local elected officials welcome the move, which could strengthen administration, though there is some wariness that it also will expand and refine security structures and control.⁸⁵ Also well received have been Education Minister Nouria Benghebrit's efforts since 2016 to close the gap between educational indicators in south and north, though this long-term project will not soon solve the former's challenges.⁸⁶ Dialogue between local stakeholders and high-ranking officials has led to fulfilling certain protester demands, such as job creation.⁸⁷ The unrest has had some intangible benefits as well, such as elevating the visibility of southern populations, which has helped them push their agenda and argue that solutions can come only through engagement, not top-down imposition.

It is unlikely, however, that this will be enough. While positive, the state's responses so far have largely been tactical and tentative and do not address issues that require far-reaching policy changes, such as rooting out corruption and nepotism and consulting on controversial drilling techniques. Southern activists are even more pessimistic that the state will go further to recognise their "dignity as citizens", code for building an inclusive national society that takes full account of their cultural identity and provides broadly for their economic well-being. Without that, small steps, though appreciated, come off as a way of managing dissent.⁸⁸ Dida Badi, an anthropologist from Tamanrasset, argues:

There's no strategy. First they tried to use local elites, because they thought it was a problem of the youth. When that didn't work, they used police, force, repression, in Ghardaia, in Ouargla, in In Salah. Then they saw that wasn't working, because these movements were becoming national, and even international. Now what will they do?⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Mohamed Hadou, regional deputy, Assemblée populaire de la Wilaya d'Adrar, Adrar, May 2015. The reform, which began as a 2014 Bouteflika campaign promise, is meant to develop public services, increase public sector employment and improve citizen-state relations in the south, taking into consideration the vast territory a single central *wilaya* manages and the expense of doing so. It is also to make monitoring citizens and cross-border traffic easier.

⁸⁶ "Education: Benghebrit au secours du Sud", *El Watan*, 27 May 2016.

⁸⁷ In Ouargla, the *millioniya* established the unemployed movement as an interlocutor with local authorities, with negotiations around distribution of jobs. See Section III.C above.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, CNDDC activists, Ouargla, May 2013. "They [the authorities] react as they always do to a socio-economic crisis: they send a high-ranking government official, commit funds, then vanish. There's no security when there's no development. Development would be tourism, marathons, bringing people here. It's not happening". Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Algiers, May 2015. "When there is a problem that may have political consequences, it's insufficient to give directives to recruit the people of the south. More must be done, for example a Marshall Plan Does the government not realise this? ... To force an American company to hire in the south does not work and does not solve the problem". Crisis Group interview, Moustapha Bouchachi, ex-FFS parliamentarian, Algiers, May 2015.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Algiers, May 2015.

The recent government response indicates its direction, as well as the difference from three decades ago: 1980s protests in the north were brutally put down; today's more nuanced tactics target protest leaders and favour co-optation.

B. *The South as Bellwether*

The fourth-term Bouteflika administration has undertaken sweeping measures, first promised in 1999, in the name of promoting rule of law, culminating in dismantling the powerful DRS in January 2016 and ratifying an amended constitution in February. But while these measures have radically circumscribed and even eliminated security agency meddling in politics and might indicate new guarantees for civil liberties and minority rights, the future remains in doubt.⁹⁰ The presidency has been strengthened and a rival power centre removed, but whether this will lead to the institutionalisation of rule of law remains to be seen. Ultimately, the government must strengthen reforms if it is to convince citizens it is working on their behalf, particularly given the most serious economic crisis in decades and turmoil on most borders.

The historical context has imbued southern concerns with national political significance for both government and opposition. The latter sees potential leverage for rejuvenating its fortunes and pushing for democratisation, starting with a transparent transition.⁹¹ The opposition bloc CNLTD initially gathered steam as it united Islamist and secular parties for the first time, against Bouteflika's fourth term in 2014. It has lost relevance, however, because it has come to be seen as hijacked by pro-regime figures and internally fragmented. Most coalition members are veterans of past governments, lack a platform for change and focus their critique narrowly on the president rather than the broader system.⁹² By joining the *millioniya* in Ouargla and sending a delegation to In Salah in 2015, the CNLTD was trying to regain some of its lost credibility.

Southern activists are wary of co-optation but seem willing to risk cooperation with the opposition given its substantial resources and the visibility it brings their cause.⁹³ The opposition itself has yet to garner much support in the south; isolated appearances are insufficient either to win a broad base or convince its populations that their commitment is genuine rather than opportunistic.

Perhaps more importantly, the south has become a bellwether for regime intentions. The protests offer an opportunity to show what movement toward democratic civilian rule and improved governance would look like. Signs are not encouraging. The combination of security measures, buying off or prosecuting protest leaders on flimsy charges does not inspire confidence that the state will address the most consequential national issues.

⁹⁰ The amended constitution enshrines Tamazight as an official language (Article 4) and eliminates mention of press offences. For the full text, see *Journal Officiel de la République Algérienne* N°14, 7 March 2016, at www.joradp.dz/FTP/jo-francais/2016/F2016014.pdf.

⁹¹ "We're starting to understand that in order to be more effective, it is necessary to coordinate our actions and move in the same direction, at the right moment". Crisis Group interview, Salah Dabbouz, president, LADDH national bureau, and member, Instance de suivi et de concertation de l'opposition (ISCO), Algiers, May 2015.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Algiers, May 2015.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, activists, Ouargla, In Salah, Algiers, May 2015.

V. Conclusion

Southern unrest is acutely sensitive in and for Algeria not only because of the resource reserves located there, but also because of longstanding national sovereignty concern. Recent geopolitical reconfigurations, such as an increasingly autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, an independent South Sudan and a fracturing Libya, have fuelled concern, some would say paranoia, about Western designs to partition Arab states to control their energy reserves.⁹⁴ But the authorities imagine separatist inclinations where there are none among southern protesters, whose issues are unfairness and mismanagement: that the state hides shale gas drilling, exacerbates intercommunal tensions and does not engage effectively with legitimate southern grievances such as unemployment. The security-centric government approach treats protesters as a public order risk, not a party to engage substantively.

After armed forces put down the violence in Ghardaia without addressing underlying factors, the calm is brittle. Compensating merchants for sacked and looted stocks is a start but will not prevent future clashes. As requested locally, authorities should appoint a committee to investigate recent violent outbreaks and ensure accountability among both Mozabite and Arab communities and security forces.

Southern demands for jobs and environmental protection, embodied in the movement of the unemployed in Ouargla and the anti-shale gas protesters in In Salah and beyond, raise challenges of inclusion and representation that authorities must address. A start might be to improve communication with protest leaders and their constituencies. Dialogue efforts should begin with the state clarifying its policy where there is ambiguity. If economic exigencies mean shale gas is its only option, it should declare so. Tunisia announced in June 2016 the “total and immediate” publication of all its oil contracts in response to the “Where is the oil?” campaign and clashes with security forces.⁹⁵ Likewise, if Algeria has a good case that shale gas can be extracted without harming the environment, it should make it transparently. The same applies to the discussion of job creation.

Such efforts should be carried out, where relevant, together with Sonatrach and its partners operating in the area, since they are major employers and directly affected by local unrest. Foreign oil and gas companies complain that the state makes corporate social responsibility difficult if not impossible. This is a problem because sustainable investment relies on social engagement and requires not only formal operating licenses, but also a “social license” from local stakeholders.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Algeria favours preservation of national unity and post-independence borders and has worked to ward off partition talk in Mali, Libya and Syria. Crisis Group Report, *Algeria and Its Neighbours*, op. cit.; interviews, Algerian diplomats, security officials, Algiers, 2015.

⁹⁵ “La Tunisie entame la publication des contrats pétroliers en ‘open data’”, *Jeune Afrique*, 17 June 2016.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior foreign oil company analyst, Algiers, June 2015. The secrecy and bureaucracy imposed by the state ensure that the gulf between companies and residents remains wide. “In corporate social responsibility, you talk about social license operators You want local stakeholders to see your presence and your operation as something positive that they can benefit from. When it comes to shale gas, you have protests against fracking but not against conventional projects, which means that it will be more challenging to receive this kind of social license to operate. But unconventional [projects] of course are seen as the future”. Ibid.

The challenge for both government and opposition is to understand the south and its grievances on its own terms, rather than as a foreign tool of destabilisation or a popular groundswell to be co-opted. This is also a wider opportunity to rethink governance and seize the moment as the country enters a transition or at least a leadership change. Adding urgency is the risk that southern discontent could become an instrument of an opposition seeking to paint the current system as illegitimate and ineffective, or worse, exacerbate the anti-state sentiment and feelings of neglect and exclusion upon which radical groups prey.

Algiers/Brussels, 21 November 2016

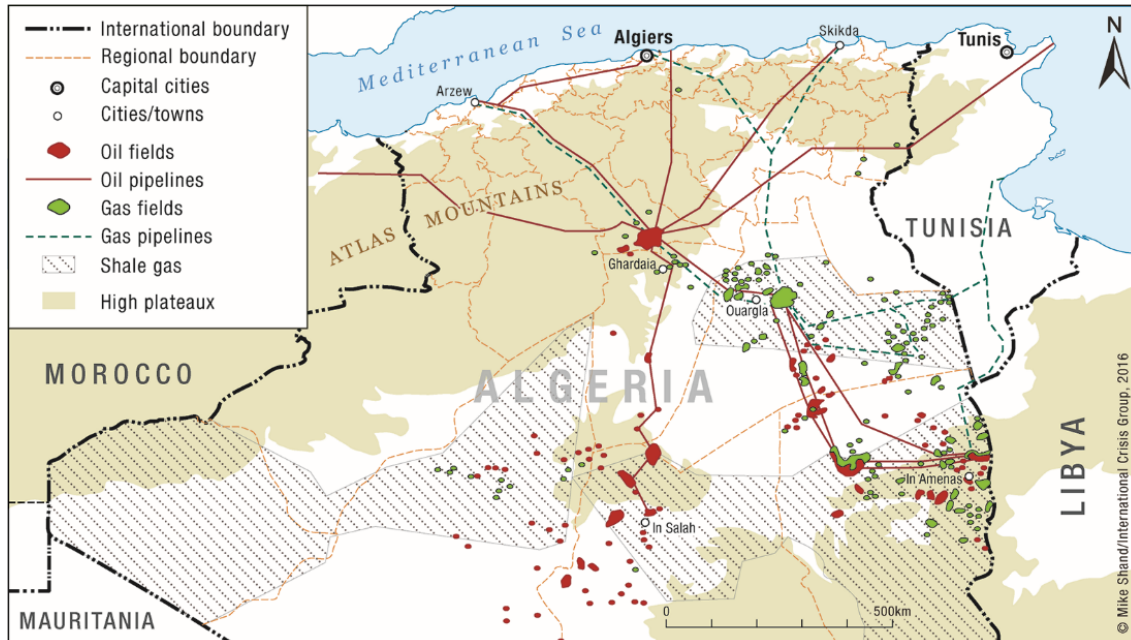
Appendix A: Map of Algeria



Courtesy of the University of Texas at Austin

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Appendix B: Map of Oil and Gas Fields in Algeria



Appendix C: Glossary of Terms

Ansar Dine	Tuareg-led jihadist group in northern Mali with ties to AQIM.
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.
CNDDC	Comité National pour la Défense des Droits des Chômeurs (National Committee for the Defence of the Rights of the Unemployed).
CNLTD	Coordination nationale pour les libertés et la transition démocratique (National Coordination for Freedoms and Democratic Transition), opposition coalition.
CRS	Compagnies républicaines de sécurité (Republican Security Companies), riot-control police.
DRS	Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité, once powerful military intelligence agency disbanded in January 2016.
FFS	Front des Forces Socialistes (Socialist Forces Front), historic opposition party with a stronghold in the Kabylie region.
FLN	Front National de Libération (National Liberation Front), historical post-independence ruling party.
GSPC	Groupe pour la Prédication et le Combat (Group for Preaching and Combat), precursor to AQIM.
ISCO	Instance de suivi et de coordination de l'opposition (Authority for Follow-up and Coordination of the Opposition), opposition coalition.
Mourabitoun	Jihadist group led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, affiliated with AQIM.
MSJ	Mouvement des Enfants du Sud pour la Justice (Movement of the Children of the South for Justice), southern activist group.
MSP	Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix (Movement of the Society for Peace), leader of the Alliance Verte Islamist coalition, the largest opposition group in parliament.
MUJAO	Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique Occidentale (Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa), AQMI offshoot focused on West Africa.
Nahda	Islamic Renaissance Movement, part of the Alliance Verte Islamist coalition.
RND	Rassemblement National Démocratique (National Democratic Rally), junior partner in the governing coalition led by the FLN.
Sonatrach	The state oil company.

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