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Algeria: Potential Security Challenge in 2017

ALEX GORKA

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In many ways, the outcome of the Arab Spring is still in flux six years on. So far, little attention has been devoted to the largest country of Africa and the Arab world. Algeria has remained largely unaffected by the Arab Spring with the history of civil war behind. It may be different this year.

Protests over government-imposed stringent austerity plan marked the start of 2017 in Algeria – the North African tinderbox. The budget signed by President Abdel Aziz Bouteflika triggered the unrest. New taxes on a variety of consumable goods and 14 percent budget cuts across the board poured more oil on the already brewing discontent fed by widespread corruption and a lack of investment. Hamstrung by a high deficit and an imbalanced economy, the country has little room to satisfy protesters' demands.

Algeria lost \$50 billion from its GDP last year alone equivalent to 22% drop in GDP as world oil prices went down. The country's economy is almost entirely based on oil and gas, an industry that is lucrative but does not produce large numbers of jobs. 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.

Algerian Minister of Interior Nouredine Badawi threatened to «*strike with an iron fist whoever tries to destabilize the country's security*» but no promise of political and economic reforms was made to address the core of the problem.

The country's population is used to generous food and fuel subsidies but apart from the oil there is little more than tourism, which is hardly an option in the region hit by instability. The existing infrastructure cannot meet the needs of the constantly increasing population (Algeria has a birth rate of 25.14%).

Adding to the mix, the recent reports that President Bouteflika, 80, is seriously ill, while there is no clear successor in sight, point to the fact that political struggle at the top is a possibility.

In late 2016, the International Crisis Group issued a report to sound the alarm bell over the situation in Algeria and the consequences of growing popular resentment.

With Islamic State retreating in Iraq, Syria, Libya and elsewhere, Algeria – the country with a population of 40 million – may be seen as an easy prey. Jihadists are not wasting time getting increasingly entrenched in the oil rich areas in the southern part of the country – the vast area beyond the Atlas Mountains and the High Plateaux that border the Mediterranean, comprising 85 per cent of the national territory and but less than 9 per cent of its population. In December, 2016 the US Department of State warned against any travel to the south or east of the country.

Last October, the Islamic State (ISIS) formally announced the start of operations in Algeria. Its leaders have threatened to strike the whole North Africa, including the countries of Maghreb. Terror threats in Morocco, the Algeria's neighbor, have become more frequent with a swelling number of Moroccan youth out of work and rural poverty going rampant.

The rising instability in neighbouring Libya – where armed militias and terrorist groups have mushroomed since the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 – has led to an increase in weapons and drug traffic at the borders. The Algerian military has positioned significant forces along the borders with Libya, Tunisia, Mali and Niger to contain the spill over of arms and terrorists.

In response to the growing threat, Algeria is strengthening ties with Russia. It has recently purchased 40 Mi-28 «Night Hunter» attack helicopters from that country. In September 2015, Moscow and Algiers signed a contract for the delivery of 14 Su-30MKA fighters to Algeria in 2016-2017.

In February, Russia and Algeria laid out a roadmap for deepening bilateral economic and military cooperation during Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to Algeria.

In 2016, Abdelkader Messahel, Algerian Minister of Maghreb Affairs, African Union and League of Arab States of Algeria, visited Syria in defiance of the Arab League's policy.

This is part of general trend. Russia's influence in the Middle East and North Africa has grown immensely. Its foothold in the region has significantly expanded recently. In view of growing Islamic State threat, Russia has already been asked to intervene militarily in Libya.

By lending a helping hand to the biggest Arab country with a 1,200 km coastline, Moscow is making a significant contribution into preventing a big trouble which could make Europe collapse. Due to its geographic proximity Algeria is a privileged partner of France and, by extension, of the European Union. Just think what will happen if internal turmoil provokes refugee flows from Algeria to Europe? The country is a key supplier of oil and gas to the West, with the third largest conventional oil reserves (12.2 billion barrels) in Africa, and the 10th biggest gas reserves (4.5 trillion cubic metres) in the world. The implications of internal conflict there could be a real nightmare.

Algeria – a major player in the fight against terrorism in the region – is also a key player in the intra-Libyan dialogue. No crisis management in that country is possible without Algiers taking part in the process. The country is a bulwark against the terrorist groups spreading in Tunisia, Libya and Mali and other countries of MENA.

The fight against the common enemy of Russia and the West may shift to North Africa. Constantly on the move, terrorists move from one country to another. They look for new areas in volatile regions to control.

The situation may greatly exacerbate in Libya to create a domino effect. North Africa is a huge region with no country unaffected by the spread of terrorism and social unrest. This threat is real and serious. It may have much broader implications than the conflict in Syria. If the situation continues to deteriorate, a large-scale international effort may become indispensable. North Africa should not become a divisive issue to complicate the relations between Russia and the West. The situation calls for cooperation and dialogue. The ongoing unrest in Algeria is an early warning not to be ignored.