

No Country for Young Men: The Military's Power-Hold in Algeria

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(Photo by Nacerdine ZEBAR/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

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Introduction

Since Algeria's independence in 1962, the question of who truly governs the country has been raised time and time again. However, due to the opacity of the political system, it has been a difficult question to answer with clarity. Nevertheless, one institution that stands above all and which is believed to hold true power in the country is that of the Algerian military; the heir to the National Liberation Army which led the independence struggle against 132 years of French colonial rule.

The popular movement, which began on February 22 this year in reaction to former President Abdulaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term, has placed the military's role under the spotlight once again. The head of the armed forces, Chief of Staff Ahmed Gaid Salah, has been depicted by his opponents as a formidable force against the people's democratic aspirations and an obstruction to the many dialogue initiatives which have emerged since Bouteflika stepped down on April 2 after 20 years in power.

Looking to the military's current position that a solution to the political impasse lies solely in presidential elections being held as soon as possible, and rejecting other political solutions calling for a transition period in order to ensure the right conditions exist before elections can be held, is one rooted in its principles. The military believe it is constitutionally-bound to protect the state and its people from both internal and external threats, which will weaken the state's institutions and the country's security. It is also formed on the basis that the heads of state in Algeria have always depended on the military's acquiescence. The extent of its interference in the political sphere has differed to various degrees over the decades, however, one aspect has remained constant: it is ever-present.

The military through the years

In 1947, the Algerian People's Party-the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (PPA-MTLD) created paramilitary structures, including the Special Organisation (SO), which foreshadowed the [National Liberation Army \(NLA\)](#). The NLA was the armed wing of the [National Liberation Front](#), a revolutionary body created by the Revolutionary Committee of Unity and Action in 1954, which directed the independence war from 1954 to 1962. The dynamic born of the SO paved the way for the army to become an incarnation of the nation and the ultimate source of power, making the head of the army the main de-facto political orchestrator.



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The entry of the military into politics was first consecrated at the [Soummam Congress](#) in August 1956: the founding act of the modern state of Algeria. Up until then, the districts under the army's control had been involved in both armed struggle and political training, healthcare, administration and overseeing justice. The operational governing body, the General Staff, commanded by [Colonel Houari Boumediene](#), who would become Algeria's second president, often acted as referees to factional struggles and in providing solutions.

From 1957, [the role of the army](#) and the security services became more pronounced. As rival groups formed ideologies and visions they believed were best for Algeria, particularly between those who had not actively participated in the armed resistance and those who had, power interests became protected via [the elimination of opponents](#). By the 1960s, the military maintained the narrative that [multiparty politics, elections and democracy](#) would not have allowed for the insurrection of the war of independence in November 1954 without it having taken up arms to protect Algerians. This perspective highlighted the seizure of power from July 1962 onwards by the staff of the NLA and the side-lining of the [Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic](#) (GPRA), paving the way for the presidency of [Ahmed Ben Bella](#).

A constitution was created on September 10, 1963 which stipulated that the NLA's participation was within the political activities and the construction of the new economic and social structures of the country. The National Charter of June 1976 stated how the "heir to the NLA, the National People's Army (ANP)...is the shield of the socialist state and driving force in the progress of the revolution and the building of socialism."

The "decision makers" in the army were formed by the strategic, geographical triangle of the Biskra/Batna Tébessa & Souk Ahras (BTS) bases. One of the most important decisions undertaken by the military was to select the head of state that remained loyal to its interests and who would rule as the civilian face masking its power hold. Ben Bella's ascent to power as the country's first

civilian president was due to the army's backing despite the fact he was imprisoned and operated outside of Algeria for the majority of the independence struggle. All attempts to rely on society to build a civilian state would henceforth collide with the power of the military apparatus and who it would deem acceptable for the position.

Three years later after Ben Bella's appointment, on June 19, 1965, the same apparatus that brought him to power ousted him in a coup d'état headed by the chief of staff of the army, Tahar Zbiri, who subsequently installed Boumedienne as the second president of Algeria. In December 1967, Boumedienne merged the political and military institutions and removed the post of chief of staff so he could assume the role of defence minister, blurring the definition of his position as chief of the army. Boumedienne's successor, [Chadli Bendjedid](#), failed to formally change this mechanism by continuing to retain the title of Minister of Defence. However, unlike Boumedienne, who had the power and trust of the generals to drive the army, Chadli was constricted in his ability to manoeuvre by Boumedienne loyalists and for the prime reason that he was not part of the infamous Oujda group (a small politico-military clan behind the army's power grab imposed by the likes of Boumedienne, Cherif Belkacem, Kasdi Merbah and Abdelaziz Bouteflika.) Throughout the 1980s, Chadli strove to weaken the 'services' and attempt to control them but was unsuccessful.



During Bendjedid's presidency, a degree of modernisation and increased professionalisation was adopted by the army in which the old guard was replaced by a new generation of senior officers. Less than six months after the [Black October riots](#) in 1988 and following the constitutional referendum of February 1989, which paved the way for a multi-party system, the military renounced their seats on the central committee of the FLN. The appointment in July 1990 of Defence Minister Khaled Nezzar enabled him to gain authority over the secret services, the notorious Department of Reassignment and Security (DRS), which enabled the separation of the President

from intelligence sources and gave key military figures full control.

Where the 1963 and 1976 Constitutions gave the army a political role as an "instrument of the revolution", the 1989 Constitution's definition of the army officially relegated it to the realm of national defence due to fears it would force the FLN to restructure or become a foundation by which the constitutional edifice would rest. But with the success of the [Islamic Salvation Front](#) (FIS) party in the second round of the country's democratic elections in 1992, the army entered the political realm once more by preventing the results from declaring FIS the winner, banning the party and subsequently provoking a [deadly civil war](#). The message was clear: democracy is a threat to civil peace and national harmony and so the tactic was to create and maintain a generalised situation of belligerency which would present the military as the sole source from which solutions would be derived and peace could be acquired. Its exertion of power once again, beyond its mission, highlighted the political mechanisms of the military hierarchy and their intransigence on maintaining total power no matter the cost.

With the rise of General Mohamed Lamari as the army's Chief of Staff in 1993, and the departure of [Generals Nezzar, Liamine Zeroual, Abdelmalek Guenzia and Abbas Gheziel](#), the concentration of the military's power transitioned away from the [traditional BTS circle](#) and became more centralised. The [DRS](#), formally under the authority of the army, was able to widen its scope of action by becoming the prime source of information, brains and clandestine armed wing. The services had at their disposal the most effective means of influence on political and economic life and it was the population that ended up paying the highest price for it.

The mastermind of Military Security, [Kasdi Merbah](#), paved the way for the birth of the DRS, and the war enabled it to reach such a powerful standing that it began to effectively operate as a state within a state. Its head, [General Mohamed "Toufik" Mediene](#) - known locally as the 'Lord of Algeria' (rabb al-Jaza'ir), had considerable weight in the political-military system. His deputy, Smaïn Lamari, was charged with organising the 'special operations' of the war, which included the manipulation of "Islamist" violence, the creation of death squads, the organisation of enforced disappearances and widespread torture and executions.

Along with Lamari and Toufik, the "generals of eradication" included General-Major Larbi Belkheir, the regime's mastermind during the 1980s who benefited from the crucial support from influential figures within French politics; General-Major Khaled Nezzar, a key decision-maker and Army Corps General Mohamed Lamari, the army's Chief of Staff, one of the organisers of the putsch of Jan-



(Photo by Sergei Fadeichev/TASS via Getty Images)

uary 1992 and responsible for putting the army at the service of Toufik and Lamari. The influence and alliances of these figures fluctuated during the civil war but the strength of this circle of decision-makers lay in their ability to remain united on the main objective of preserving their political, military and economic powers.

Algeria's head of state in 1992, Mohamed Boudiaf paid with his life for attempting [to impose](#) civilian leadership upon the military hierarchy- a murder for which [his sons believe Toufik](#) is culpable. Though the organisation of the repression stemmed from the conclaves comprised of the most influential generals and chiefs of military regions and units, it was primarily the DRS who were charged, before the war, with the coordination of the repression comprised of disinformation, manipulations, torture and murders.

As the civil war between militants and the army reached its brutal peak in 1996, [massive fraud](#) was employed to enable the army's candidate, Abdelaziz Bouteflika (foreign minister under Boumediene), to take over from Zeroual who was forced to resign in 1998. With the military seeking room to recover from damages inflicted to its image inflicted by the war, Bouteflika was afforded the freedom to rule, which he meticulously used to his advantage to create discord within the military ranks. After his re-election in 2004, Bouteflika replaced the army's chief of staff Lamari, a figure who had favoured Bouteflika's opposition candidate Ali Benflis, with Ahmed Gaid Salah, who holds the position to this day.

Following the end of the civil war, the army undertook a number of [liberalisation initiatives](#). In 2002, for the first time it organised an open press conference with Lamari and, a few months later, an international symposium on terrorism was organised where researchers and generals could share the same platform. Despite efforts to project a more open image, Generals like Toufik continued to support Bouteflika's presidency and backed constitutional changes in 2008 that would see Bouteflika stay on as president for life. On September 23, 2013 Bouteflika abolished the military judicial police leading to the removal of two

generals, the early retirement of the head of the National Gendarmerie, and the placing of the intelligence services under presidential decree. The [changes were part of sweeping reforms](#) and reshuffles in senior and sensitive positions in the army and intelligence services perceived as an attempt to keep them at arm's length from politics.

In 2014 and 2015, further purges were initiated and several DRS officers were retired early. Toufik's immunity as the "Lord of Algeria" was slowly eroding. The January 2013 [terrorist attack at the Tigantourine](#) natural gas field in Amenas provided the opportunity for Bouteflika to curb Toufik's power once and for all by forcing him to eventually resign in 2015. The DRS was dissolved and replaced by the Directorate of Security Services (DSS) in January 2016, and placed under presidential supervision before being dissolved in [April 2019 by Gaid Salah](#).

Bouteflika's third and fourth terms, in 2009 and 2014, would not have been possible had it not been for the military's backing. Likewise, his bid for a fifth term was cancelled and [his presidency terminated](#) when [Gaid Salah learnt](#) of scheming between Toufik (who despite being forced to retire has attempted to remain influential within the country's politics until [his arrest in May](#)) and Bouteflika's brother Said, believed to have effectively assumed the role of president after Bouteflika suffered a stroke in 2013, to rid him of his position.

As the country nears its eighth month of peaceful protests, one of the main demands of the popular movement is to see the departure of Gaid Salah, a figure they see as an obstacle to their democratic aspirations. Many fear the onset of a military state due to the fact Gaid Salah has imposed a solution to the current political impasse which leaves no room for actors, not loyal to his vision, to have a say in the country's future.

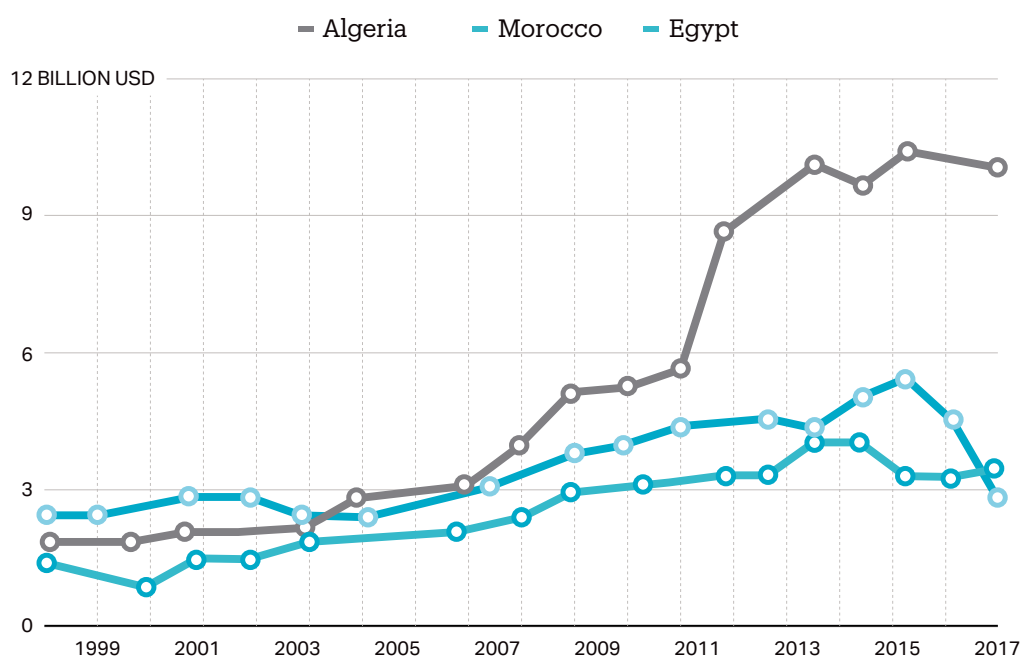
The Whys and Whos

Algeria is divided into six main military regions. The first military region – with its headquarters located in Blida – and the most strategic, is comprised of Algiers, Kabylia and Mitidja, and covers around 60% of the army. Oran is the headquarters of the second military region in the West; the third one is in the South-West, with its headquarters in Béchar facing Morocco; the fourth in the South-East, with its headquarters in Ouargla has particular importance as it is based in the oil region. The fifth region is in the East, with its headquarters in Constantine and the sixth region, with its headquarters in Tamanrasset, is in control of the deep south.

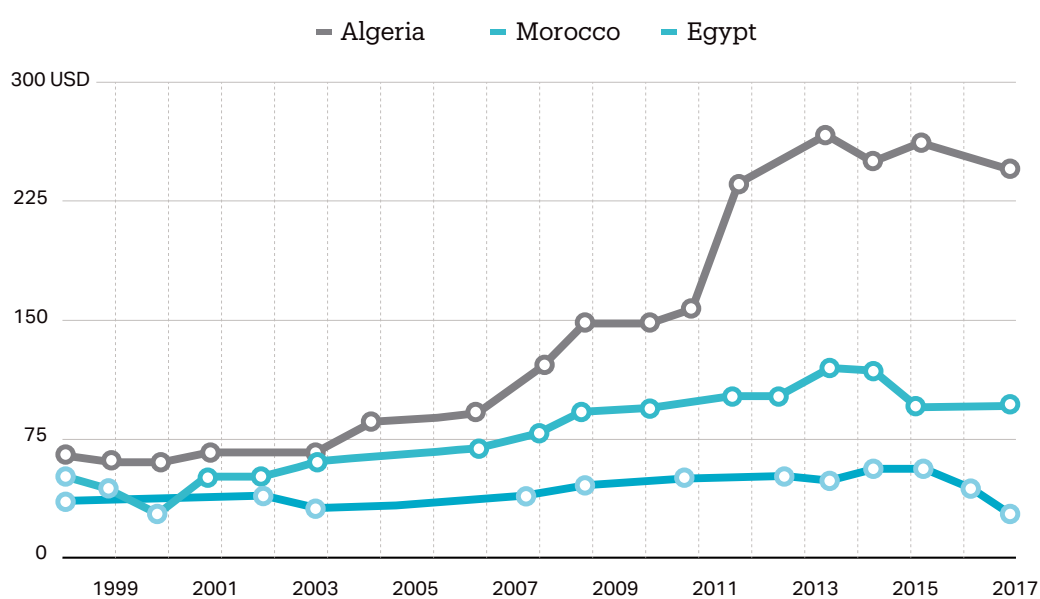
The National People's Army (ANP) ranks in [25th place of global armies](#) and after Egypt, is the second most powerful army on the African continent with an active force

Algeria's Military Expenditures in the North African Context

Military Expenditures (total)



Military Expenditures (per capita)



Source: SIPRI Copyright Stratfor 2018

of [520,000](#) and a reserve of over [272,350](#). The army operates through a number of power structures that balance and monitor each other: the General Staff, the intelligence branch, the gendarmerie and the [operation of the six military regions](#) of Greater Algiers, Oran, Bechar, Ouargla, Constantine and Tamanrasset.

The military function is divided into [various roles](#). As arbiter, its function is to maintain the political system and ensure political stability. As guardians, the military believe it is its mission to intervene in economic and political crises in order to safeguard the people and the country's institutions. In addition to its rhetoric of national protection, the concerns of the military are essentially material, namely, protecting its share in the country's oil, gas and hydrocarbon markets and investments in strategic sectors in order to ensure their officers are best placed strategically to reap maximum business benefits.

Due to its experience in the civil war, the military has become a staple of counter-terrorism, a status it has manipulated in order to define what and whom constitutes a threat to Algeria. Since September 11, 2001, the narrative of the threat of "Islamism" has been deployed as a guarantee of the unconditional support from the West. In 2017, the government increased its defence budget to [\\$10 billion](#) and has become Africa's main arms importer. Algeria has [6,734 km](#) of borders with seven countries, the majority of which are closed due to perceived security threats such as cross-border militant operations, illegal migration and drug smuggling.

Since 1962, the ANP has used the government as its civilian facade to effectively rule the country's affairs covertly. At the same time, the military has acquired a legitimacy rooted in the people's recognition that the state's protection lies solely within this institution. Within Algeria's Constitution, sovereignty lies with the people but in reality, the army is the only sovereign, a status it [cannot affirm openly](#). Since independence, Algeria has had five constitution changes (1963, 1976, 1989, 1996, 2016) which have proven problematic in their implementation which has suited the narrative of *Le Pouvoir*, meaning "the power", the name given by Algerians to refer to the Algerian regime and opaque power system.

The Algerian army, like many Third World military structures, has often confused the rule of law with the missions of maintenance of order and security, which should fall under the tasks of the police or gendarmerie. The military has repeatedly intervened to repress demonstrations -for example the [Berber spring of April 1980](#), the October riots in 1988 - and rejected the results of the 1992 elections. The military has consistently sought to ensure the sustainability of the system in place by securing its interests at the highest levels of the state.

The weakening of the political field is to primarily de-

value civil society in order to show its incompetence as a stakeholder in politics and to indicate to the greater public how choosing such an option will automatically entail disorder, as seen in the 1990's. This stems from the fear that components of civil society will be able to produce autonomous elites who will prevent the army from co-opting candidates in order to control those leading the government. As far as the army is concerned, it embodies national sovereignty and the distrust of the electoral will to select those who should be governing [stems from the fear that civilians will betray the nation](#) because national sovereignty is embodied within the army. Therefore, those permitted to govern are those who agree to the unwritten rule that the army is the source of power.



The "threat" of the foreign

What happens in Algeria, Africa's largest country by land-mass, will have repercussions in the region and has therefore been closely observed by both regional and international actors alike. As a vital player in maintaining stability in North Africa as well as in the volatile Sahel, any unrest in Algeria could tip the delicate security balance in the region, particularly as the situation in [neighbouring Libya](#) continues to deteriorate.

At the end of August, the French foreign minister weighed in with [comments](#) on where the solution for Algeria's political impasse lies. Reiterating France's position since protests began on February 22, Jean-Yves Le Drian stated that the solution for Algeria is democratic dialogue. A few days later, the Russian ambassador to Algeria commented in support of the military's position that swift elections is the only legitimate solution, a position rejected by the people. Over half a year of protests, an ongoing political impasse and an economy threatening to crash will undoubtedly engender more international statements by actors looking to ensure that their inter-

ests are protected. A transitioning Algeria is concerning for many comfortable with the country's status quo. In Algeria, the view of the foreign is of its "meddling"- the line of *Le Pouvoir* and recycled by Gaid Salah in his weekly speeches.

France has carefully exercised its neo-colonial project of "[Franceafrigue](#)" with all its former colonised states in Africa. With Algeria things are no different, leading some to question if in 1962 Algeria truly became independent from France. Unsurprisingly, France has been cautious with its wording when commenting on a post-Bouteflika Algeria for fear it will be accused of interfering. A country, which in 1992 backed the junta's cancelling of elections for fear of an Islamist takeover would spell disaster for its interests, has enjoyed a close relationship with Algeria's [Le Pouvoir](#). They seek for the status quo to be maintained in order to continue to benefit economically, namely in guaranteeing the import of oil and gas from Algeria. [Some observers](#) believe France's careful choice of words is representative of a fear that in seeing a democratic, hegemonic Algeria, its cosy relationship will come to an end and in its place demands for compensation for the [crimes committed under colonialism](#) and a complete overview of future relations not defined by Algeria's subservience to France. There is also the high possibility that a democratic Algeria will simply continue to maintain close ties with France with both sides reaping the benefits.

Russia, one of Algeria's close allies and main weapon providers, is likely to find interest with Gaid Salah and another "strongman" in the region who isn't so loyal to the West. Back in March, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [echoed](#) the same "concerns" of Gaid Salah regarding the alleged efforts to destabilise Algeria before talks were held in Moscow with Algerian Deputy Prime Minister at the time Ramtane Lamamra. From a military and technical standpoint, Algeria has been one of Russia's main regional partners since the 1960s and over the years Moscow has attempted to establish a greater Russian presence in Algeria's oil and gas sectors, where it faces competition from the European Union (EU). As long as there isn't interference from other states, it is likely its stance towards Algeria will not radically alter from its current bilateral partnership and military and economic cooperation. As far as Russia is concerned, any potential for Western meddling in "allied" countries is the number one concern and if it can have Gaid Salah prioritise Moscow as a strategic heavyweight ally then it is likely we will see more of a Russian presence in Algeria.

The Gulf states have also been observing how the situation in Algeria develops. The Saudi and United Arab Emirates (UAE) "counter-revolutionary" bloc [has so far provided](#) support both economically and militarily to Bahrain, aided financially in the Egyptian coup in 2013 and actively supported Libya's [General Khalifa Haftar](#). Riyadh's position in seeing the Deep State in Algeria maintain its power

hold comes as no surprise given its support for the junta in 1992. However, its lack of proximity to Algeria and any of its key players means it is less likely to inject funding into making Algeria another "[anti-status quo](#)" [political order](#). Both Riyadh and the UAE do not want to see any form of Islamist ascendancy nor to see Algeria develop close relations with Turkey or Qatar and in doing so creating wedges between its influence and the country. However it is still not clear just how invested Saudi Arabia and the UAE truly are with Algeria (indeed Gaid Salah [has flown to Abu Dhabi](#) a number of times) and whether or not we will be seeing another of its projects for regional dominance in Algeria next.

Shaping the "what next?"

When mass protests broke out on February 22 2019, Gaid Salah's initial reaction was to question the calls pushing "[lost](#)" Algerians to "[perilous](#)" paths and to condemn those looking to return the country to "years of embers and pain"- a carefully embedded narrative of manipulation that has maintained the status quo, bought social peace, and dissuaded Algerians from expressions of political frustration. With the popular movement mobilising for the last seven months, the question that remains now is whether or not Algeria is heading towards a military state where the solutions are anything but those advocated for by civilians.

The role of the army in the current political impasse is being observed closely as the rhetoric of Gaid Salah becomes more authoritarian and his speeches more threatening. He continues to maintain that elections and not a political transition, is the only suitable course of action, contrary to the demands of the popular movement. His consolidation of power has included moving the intelligence services, previously under the authority of the president, to be under the military's supervision and ensuring key positions are held by trusted individuals. For example, the departure of Major General Athmane Tartag, whom Bouteflika had put in charge of coordinating the DSS.

The army is torn between saving the old system, and with it the current status quo which has benefited *Le Pouvoir*, or staying true to the Constitution's articles, and allowing for the sovereignty to be embodied within the people and their choices. The ANP is likely to remain as a [central and non-inclusive element of the Algerian state](#). Having said that, for many Algerians this is not a negative thing; [75% of Algerians surveyed](#) revealed high levels of trust in the army according to a 2017 [Arab Barometer report](#) and judging by the weekly slogans of "djeich w chaab, khawa khawa" (the army and people are brothers), support of the



army is strong- just not for its Chief of Staff. The question now is how disposable Gaid Salah is for the military, who at 80, is in the twilight of his career.

Today, the ANP's options are only but a few; either assuming directly and institutionally power in the form of a military dictatorship, or confining itself to being an institution limited by the rule of law, contributing decisively to a transitory period. However what singles out 2019 is how the historical legitimacy, the foundation of *Le Pouvoir* and the ANP, is no longer operative 57 years after independence because the people have stopped buying this narrative and are now doing everything in their power to reclaim their history and the legacy of Algeria's [re-vered revolutionaries](#). As a result, the army can no longer expect to have their legitimacy enshrined by the people's trust when it is their own institution that is preventing the people from actualising their vision for Algeria.

For the success of a civilian state, the generals must recognise that they are only civil servants without the legitimacy to designate the president and the directors of institutions. As long as the military as an institution refuses to ride the wave of change, it is unlikely the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria will see a true revolution for its people. Currently the route of analysis centres more around questions than answers on Algeria's current civil-military relations which are still in their developing stages. Given Algeria's political apparatus, it is unlikely that we will be looking to another model out of the cur-

rent impasse and so focus should now be centred on how much more involvement the military will be looking to exercise, what the red lines will be and how many obstacles are placed in the path of civil society by the military, in preventing it from creating a roadmap that represents the people's demands, or hosting figures of negotiation not handpicked by the military.

What can be ascertained is that for both the military and the people, with each passing day the stakes are rising and with change to: crisis-stricken economy time is on no one's side. With the country attempting a revolution from all fronts, it is vital for the military to also follow suit if it wishes to remain "brothers" with the people and not their frenemy.