



# The security sector and stability in Algeria

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## Question

*To what extent does the Algerian Security Sector (including counter-terrorism measures, and with particular attention to the Army) support (or undermine) Algeria's stability?*

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## 1. Summary

Algeria faces a broad range of security threats, including terrorism, instability in neighbouring countries, drug trafficking and ethnic tensions. While the Algerian armed forces play an important role in combatting these threats, they also contribute to instability. Key findings from the literature include:

- The army continues to have significant influence on political decision-making. Efforts to curb this influence have had a limited impact, and are often described as superficial in the literature.
- In the M'Zab region, the heavy security presence has reinforced ethnic tensions between Ibadite Berbers and Arab-speaking populations.
- Corruption in the military undermines public trust in the security forces and potentially contributes to instability.
- While Algeria uses a broad range of counter-terrorism measures, it lacks a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy.

While there is a significant body of literature on the Algerian security sector, much of the literature does not explicitly address the impact of the security sector on stability in the country. The literature search conducted for this report did not identify any rigorous evidence-based papers on this subject. Rather, the literature consists largely of opinion pieces by think tanks. For the purposes of this report both English and French language literature was reviewed.

## 2. Security forces

The research undertaken for this report uncovered no rigorous evidence or analysis on the link between the security forces and stability, nor any analysis focusing specifically on the navy or the air force. The literature reviewed focuses largely on the army and the intelligence services.

There is consensus in the literature that the Algerian armed forces are by far the best performing security forces in Africa (see for example NATO, 2016, p. 3 and Gaub, 2015, p. 3). However, figures for the size of the defence forces vary considerably. According to NATO the armed forces are 512,000 strong, with an additional 400,000 reservists (NATO, 2016, p. 3). However, according to a briefing paper published by the European Union Institute for Security Studies, they number 130,000 (army – 110,000, navy – 6,000, and air force – 14,000) (Gaub, 2015, p. 3). Algeria has compulsory national service as well as a well-organised professional officer corps. Women are represented in all the armed forces, but only men have to undertake compulsory military service (NATO, 2016, p. 4).

Algeria faces a number of security threats including terrorism, instability in neighbouring countries, ethnic tensions, and drug trafficking. According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the Algerian government has identified drug trafficking as a key security threat. This threat is perceived to be even greater than that posed by militancy in the region, to which it is linked. The Algerian army has been responsible for fighting trafficking in the Sahara in particular since 2013 (2018, p. 31). Algeria's efforts to counter terrorism are discussed in Section 3.

## **Role of the military in politics**

According to a report published by the Carnegie Middle East Centre, Algeria's military is the principal holder of national power. Various articles refer to the army's role in political decision-making. The degree of influence attributed to the army varies with some papers claiming that the army takes political decisions and the government implements them (Ghanem-Yazbeck, 2018), while others state that the army just influences decision-making (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018, p. 10). The military has reportedly 'rejected any civilian effort to oversee internal military affairs, define national security policy, make military officers accountable to civil courts, or diminish the military's political functions.' Algerian presidential candidates require the military's approval. This means that presidents must have the support of the leaders and representatives of the army and they have to share power with those that helped to bring them to office (Ghanem-Yazbeck, 2018). Ghanem-Yazbeck attributes the army's political power to the legitimacy it gained from leading Algeria's bid for independence, arguing that this led to the military becoming identified with the nation itself (2018).

Since the 1991 military coup the army's intelligence services remained effectively independent and they were referred to as 'le pouvoir' along with clans within the military. 'Le pouvoir' is described as an 'economic mafia', which retained political control 'behind the scenes' (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018, p. 10). However, in September 2015, President Bouteflika dismissed the head of the Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS), Mohamed Mediene, who had been in this post for 25 years. In January 2016, Bouteflika abolished the DRS altogether, replacing it with the Security Services Department (DSS), a body under presidential control (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018, p. 11). According to a briefing paper published by the Center for Security Studies, these measures have given the President room for manoeuvre when it comes to the army. However, it argues that the armed forces continue to view themselves as guarantors of stability and unity in the country and still play a discreet role in political decision-making (Watanabe, 2017, p. 3). Others argue that despite its significantly increased budget, the military now interferes less in governance in Algeria. This is however qualified by the point that certain elements of the military, which benefit from the current economic and political system, are widely viewed as an obstacle to further liberalisation (ACLEDE).

## **Increased ethnic tensions as a result of security presence**

Ongoing tensions in the M'Zab region between Ibadite Berbers and Arabic-speaking populations have reportedly reduced in recent years, with no violence having been reported for over a year due to an increased security presence. However, according to the Bertelsmann Stiftung 'the security services' apparent bias against the Ibadite youth has reinforced ethnic cleavages and a sense of injustice for them at the hands of the state' (2018, p. 34). They note that, according to observers, the causes for the tensions are more connected to trafficking and illegal trade across the whole region rather than real ethnic divisions (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018, p. 34).

## **Incomplete reconciliation**

The 2006 Reconciliation Charter is widely viewed as having brought peace to Algeria. However, the amnesties given to state security forces and terrorists continue to be seen as being unjust, especially by the families of the 100,000 victims of the conflict and by those of the 8,000 "disappeared." Moreover, compensation has not led to genuine reconciliation as families of victims still want to know the truth about what happened to the victims (Bertelsmann Stiftung,

2018, p. 35). Amnesty International states that in order for there to be genuine reconciliation, existing provisions in the legislation granting immunity to security forces and state armed militias for serious human rights violations and criminalising public criticism of the conduct of the security forces should be repealed. They also state the need 'full, impartial and independent investigations into cases of enforced disappearances and unlawful killings; to clarify the fate of victims of enforced disappearances and to provide their families with an effective remedy' to be conducted (2016, p. 6).

## Corruption

Citing data from a report published by Transparency International, the Armed Conflict Location and Events Database (ACLED) states that 'unchecked military spending and widespread defence corruption are undermining public trust in the government and in its armed forces, while feeding arms proliferation, organised crime and regional instability.'<sup>1</sup>

## 3. Counter-terrorism measures

While there is a significant body of literature on the counter-terrorism efforts being undertaken by the Algerian government, this does not cover the impact that these strategies have on the country's stability.

Algeria uses a range of strategies to counter terrorism. These include:

- providing social services and family outreach to at-risk youths in the country
- a development plan and a comprehensive national reconciliation policy
- reinforced protection for its energy facilities, new military observer posts, and working cooperatively with neighboring governments, including Tunisia, to streamline information sharing regarding international smuggling operations and transnational terrorist activity.
- new laws have been added to the Algerian Penal Code that expand punitive measures for crimes related to financing, supporting or acting as foreign fighters, and the use of technology for terrorist recruitment purposes. Algeria has also taken steps to crack down on Internet service providers who do not comply with legal obligations to store information or withhold access to criminal material
- the government has encouraged imams who have defected or 'repented' from terrorist groups to share religious explanations for the illegitimacy of their former terrorist groups.
- the government has also actively promoted more 'moderate' imams, and created a national television agency and radio station that promotes government-approved interpretations of Islam. The government also exerts significant control within mosques throughout the country. All imams in Algeria must be approved, trained, and employed by the country's Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments. There are fines and prison sentences for anyone who preaches at a mosque that has not been approved by the government.
- The government has set up an 'anti-suicide bomber' programme, and has actively worked to promote non-violent strains of Salafism and Sufism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://government.defenceindex.org/countries/algeria/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/algeria>

Despite all these measures the Counter Extremism Project states that Algeria lacks a comprehensive strategy to counter terrorism, and that the balance of power within military and counterterrorism institutions remains unclear.<sup>3</sup>

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## About this report

*This report is based on five days of desk-based research. The K4D research helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. For any enquiries, contact [helpdesk@k4d.info](mailto:helpdesk@k4d.info).*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/algeria>

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