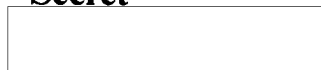




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# **Islamic Resurgence in Algeria**



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**A Research Paper**

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*NESA 83-10316  
November 1983*

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# Islamic Resurgence in Algeria



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**A Research Paper**

This paper was prepared by   
 Office of Near Eastern and  
South Asian Analysis. It was coordinated with the  
Directorate of Operations. 

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be  
directed to the Chief, Arab-Israeli Division, NESAs,



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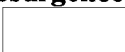
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**Islamic Resurgence  
in Algeria**



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**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 17 November 1983  
was used in this report.*

The rise of religious conservatism has caused the Algerian Government to adjust its religious and social policies and is a problem for the regime, but we believe that Algeria's Islamic fundamentalists do not immediately threaten the government because they have no leaders who could organize and direct serious opposition. Furthermore, the fundamentalists are out of step with other opposition groups, which prevents them from uniting into a single regime-threatening force.



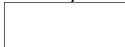
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We believe that the fundamentalist movement in Algeria stems primarily from the frustrations caused by rapid industrialization, the failure of socialism to solve economic problems, and the tensions created by competing Arab and French influence throughout Algerian society. The current revival has also been fueled by a uniquely Algerian phenomenon of a large segment of society seeking to reduce state control of religious practices. Discontent caused by these currents has been given sharper focus by the revolution in Iran and fundamentalist activity elsewhere in the Middle East.



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In our estimation, militant fundamentalists have had difficulty infiltrating the military—the real backbone of the regime. They have their greatest appeal among Algerian youth and students in their late teens and early twenties, many of whom see the movement as an opportunity to articulate their nonreligious demands. As many as 5,000 of Algeria's 70,000 university students have been involved in fundamentalist-related activities, including clashes with police and antifundamentalist student groups.



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Despite the trend in Algeria toward religious conservatism, most Algerians do not appear attracted to militant Islam. They have enjoyed the consumerism accompanying French influence and are not attracted to the ascetic lifestyle advocated by the fundamentalists.



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Members of the regime do not appear to be particularly strict in their religious observance, but they are taking measures to ensure that their Islamic credentials—a cornerstone of their political legitimacy—are not seriously challenged. The regime has control of the national religious apparatus, which it uses to strengthen its image and to monitor religious expression in Algeria.



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The Algerian Government will probably continue a hardline policy, resorting to force only when militants threaten public order. Earlier this year it departed drastically from its policy of tolerance by using harsh measures to dismantle what was perceived to be a budding fundamentalist threat. The regime has not had to adjust any of its major domestic economic development programs or foreign policy initiatives, nor is it likely to be seriously intimidated by militants. 

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Efforts to improve relations with the United States are not likely to be affected by the regime's attempts to cope with fundamentalists. Moreover, Algerian officials would almost certainly provide rapid and complete protection to US interests in Algeria, should they become targets of Islamic zealotry. 

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## Islamic Resurgence in Algeria

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### The Historical Setting

In Algeria, as in many Muslim countries, Islam in its most traditional form is showing renewed vigor. [redacted]

[redacted] the French colonial rulers generally took a hostile stance toward Islam in Algeria and restricted Islamic education, converted mosques into churches, and sought to replace the values and culture of Islam with those of France. Reaction to this approach resulted in part in the identification of orthodox Islam with the movement for an independent Algeria. During the war with the French (1954-62), adherence to Islam became a symbol of national pride and social cohesion as much as a personal affirmation of faith. The nationalist movement began with this impulse, and the restoration of Islam to its former place in society was an oft-stated goal of the revolution. [redacted]

We believe that since the war of independence, however, the Algerian Government has sought to weave together the principles of Islam and the secular socialist state, with the latter taking a clear priority.

[redacted] political leaders have used Islam as a rallying point for national loyalties and a justification for modernization, while both Western-educated intellectuals and Islamic scholars have been encouraged to reconcile traditional Islamic values with the development of a modern society. In effect, [redacted] the government has tried to co-opt the powerful influence of Islam to promote a fundamentally secular way of life, and the regime has taken almost total control of the country's religious institutions. Modernization is given precedence over tradition, and the formal mechanisms of religion—the *ulema*, religious books and pamphlets, most mosques, and mosque-based social associations—have been turned into instruments of the state.

[redacted]

Algerian leaders, in our opinion, have felt compelled to exercise tight control because “restoration” of Islam remains a cornerstone of their political legitimacy. Furthermore, questioning of their Islamic credentials would be viewed as a direct challenge to the

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### Islamic Practices in Algeria

Algeria's historic development and distance from the Arab heartland have allowed different Islamic practices to evolve:

- Algerian Muslims, like most North Africans, adhere to the Malaki school of Sunni Islamic law, one of four and the first of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Muslims from Egypt through Iran follow the Hanafi school, and most Saudi Arabians follow the puritanical variant of Sunni Islam known as Wahabbism.
- Many Algerians follow the teachings of Islamic mystics known as *marabouts* and erected shrines in their honor. Both practices are scorned by orthodox Muslims in the Arabian peninsula.
- Dietary prohibitions are not strictly followed, and alcoholic beverages are openly consumed.
- Algerian Sunnis also differ from the Shias who predominate in Iran because they tend to view the time of Muhammad as the ideal society. On the other hand, Shias, with their messianic tradition, tend to believe that the “Golden Age” lies in the future and, in our opinion, are more likely than Sunnis to accept a prophetic leadership advocating revolutionary change. [redacted]

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regime. A less controlled religious establishment almost certainly would complicate, if not directly threaten, the government's pursuit of a modern, progressive society. [redacted]

Despite government efforts to promote secularism in daily life, we believe the trend in Algerian society is toward greater interest in and practice of religion.

The US Embassy in Algiers reports that over the past several years attendance at mosques has increased, more women are wearing traditional Islamic dress, and observance of Muslim holidays has become more widespread. The construction of independent mosques by private citizens is also increasing rapidly. [redacted]

The current revival parallels the heightened piety throughout the Islamic world but also represents a uniquely Algerian phenomenon of a large segment of society wanting to move away from state control of religious practice. We believe that the rise of fundamentalism over the past several years is part of a struggle between popular Islam, that is, a religion of the people, and official Islam, used by the state to justify and obtain consensus for secular policies. In our opinion, political strategy and religious tactics, government rhetoric and Muslim vocabulary—until now consistently intertwined in Algerian society—are becoming differentiated. Popular Islam is being used by fundamentalists to put pressure on official Islam. [redacted]

President Bendjedid tolerated the resurgence until Islamic fundamentalists began resorting to violence last year to attract popular attention. Early this year the President, [redacted]

[redacted] ordered security officials to dismantle what he believed was a budding fundamentalist movement that perhaps had even permeated the state religious apparatus. According to Embassy reporting, the government's crackdown resulted in the arrest of about 50 activists, members of the official religious establishment, including the Minister of Religious Affairs, and Algeria's most venerable religious figure, 85-year-old Ahmed Shanoun. [redacted]

#### Seeds of a Revival

Some 20 years after independence, Algerians generally appear to be tempering their enthusiasm for revolution, socialism, and some of the Western values associated with them. As the nation matures, a small but vocal number of Algerians are seeking an indigenous ideology to supersede the alien secular socialism that has failed to deliver its promises. In our opinion, the tenets of traditional Islam are, in the eyes of many Algerians, a more enduring, direct connection with their own cultural heritage and with the rest of the Arab and Muslim world and a more appealing guide for living than the socialist ideology that has dominated society since. [redacted]

In tandem with this search for a more relevant, promising ideology, scholars believe that specific pressures resulting from modernization have spawned a militant piety among a growing number of Algerians who advocate a radical change in social and political life. In our view, this more militant fundamentalism has been nurtured by a dichotomy between the rapid industrialization program pushed by the government and by the policy of Arabization, which has sharply focused the extent to which Algeria remains a society dominated by the French language and French mores and values. The Islamic revival, following the pattern of other religious resurgences, feeds on these stresses with which normal routines—secular or sacred—cannot cope. It is fueled by popular interest in the religious aspects of Iran's revolution and by the presence in Algeria of Egyptian teachers with a fundamentalist bent. [redacted]

**Industrialization.** We believe that rapid industrialization, which was proposed as the only economic course that could lead to economic independence, has pressed the country into a Western secular mold but has failed to deliver promised economic and social benefits. The development of heavy industry—steelworks, foundries, chemical factories, and refineries—is bringing about the transformation of Algeria from a traditional society to a Western-oriented technological state. Scholarly journals and government statistics show, however, that the drive for industrialization has led to maldistribution of investment between industry and other sectors, shortages of consumer goods, and inflation problems. Moreover, the level of technology insisted upon has often been beyond the capability of the local labor force, fostering dependence on foreign technicians and reliance on Europe as an outlet for 1 million Algerian workers—about one-third of the active male population—who cannot find jobs at home. [redacted]

Embassy reporting suggests that industrialization and its concomitant Westernized lifestyle have caused tension between the emerging working class and the traditional bazaar workers. As a result of rising wages and shorter working hours, the Westernized industrial

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sector has more leisure time and higher consumption than the bazaar sector. The reporting also shows that, as more women are working and more girls are going to school, the new working class is beginning to question traditional male and female roles in society.

[redacted]

To the conservative Algerian bazaar merchants, the new industrial lifestyle looks unacceptably progressive and dangerous. [redacted] the bazaaris see the technocrats, politicians, and industrial workers as all adhering to the same secular Western views about culture, leisure, consumerism, and money. The bazaar class is more comfortable with an austere lifestyle where males and females are segregated, industry is small scale, and there is a clear separation between work and leisure—patterns they consider sanctioned by tradition and the Quran. [redacted]

**Arabization.** The policy of Arabization, which the Government of Algeria has endorsed since 1975 to build a national, anticolonial identity, has tended, in our view, to deepen the fissure between the Westernized industrial and the traditional rural and bazaar sectors of society. Arabization is exposing Algerian students to their Arabic heritage, which makes the students even more aware of the gulf between Islamic traditions and the secular nature of contemporary Algeria. The use of Arabic in university instruction is largely confined to the humanities and social sciences, whereas French is the language of instruction for science and engineering. As a result, Arabic-educated students find fewer and less lucrative job opportunities than those trained in French. [redacted]

**Islamic Fundamentalists**

Conservative religious elements regularly have pressed the government for the imposition of stricter Islamic observance, [redacted] They have had little sustained success, however, in entering the political arena. [redacted] their most reknowned association, al-Qiyam, was banned in 1968 in part because the regime—choosing to focus on Islamic education, economic development, and agrarian reform—believed that al-Qiyam had gone too far in its attempt to seize the role of guardian of pure Islam and government ethics from the regime in power. [redacted]

Islamic fundamentalists remained relatively quiet until 1975, when they joined the nationwide public debate of the National Charter, the drafting of which was the first step in the preparation of a new constitution that was promulgated in 1976. Arabization and adherence to Islam became central principles of the charter, and since then the fundamentalists have openly pressed for Arabization and demanded that the state maintain Islamic values. By invoking the National Charter and the Constitution, [redacted] the fundamentalists have felt justified in criticizing the government on other issues that they claim have religious implications, such as the Family Code and laws governing personal status. [redacted]

Although specific fundamentalist groups like al-Qiyam and the Muslim Brotherhood have been outlawed by the government, we believe that these groups have successfully infiltrated Algerian society over the years. [redacted] the Muslim Brotherhood penetrated Algerian society during the early 1960s with the help of the Egyptian Government, Muslim Brotherhood chapters elsewhere, and private citizens. Al-Qiyam identified itself with the Brotherhood and became firmly established at the University of Algiers. [redacted] it continues to operate clandestinely under the name al-Dawah and receives financial and political support from a sister organization in Saudi Arabia. Offshoots of this group, including the Front Islamique, the Mouvement Islamique en Algerie, and the Takfir wa al-Hijrah, have periodically been identified by the Algerian Government. We do not know, however, if these are separate movements or merely factions of al-Dawah. [redacted]

[redacted] Algerian authorities are concerned most with Libyan aid, [redacted] They believe—with only marginal evidence—that support from Libya is part of Qadhafi's effort to destabilize the region. [redacted]

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the government is particularly wary that Qadhafi may be encouraging fundamentalist activities through former Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella, who maintains close ties with Libya. [redacted]

We believe that the militant movement has its broadest appeal among Algerian students and urban youth in their late teens or early twenties. The movement provides them a context within which their demands for control of university life and employment prospects can be expressed. Embassy and press reporting indicates that as many as 5,000 students have been involved in fundamentalist-related demonstrations at the University of Algiers and its branch campus, which has a student population of about 70,000. Students from lower middle- and working-class backgrounds—who do not have access to the French education necessary to compete for the best jobs—in particular probably believe that a more Arab Muslim society would offer them better employment opportunities and would reduce competition with their French-educated counterparts. [redacted]

By all accounts, the fundamentalist movement in Algeria is not so pervasive as that found in Tunisia and Egypt, for example. Even in the university, where its numbers are greatest, it appears to be fluid and poorly organized—its sympathizers uniting for a specific purpose and disbanding quickly thereafter. According to Embassy reporting, religious activists are subject to intense police scrutiny and surveillance. [redacted]

Despite government efforts to control violence between militants and authorities, clashes have been on the rise since 1979. Demonstrations mostly on university campuses around Algiers that have resulted in arrests and several killings of both students and police have been reported in the press. These incidents have generally stemmed from student resistance to fundamentalist activities on campus rather than from violence against the regime. The most serious demonstrations in May 1981 and December 1982 convinced the regime that Algeria faced the same potential problems regarding Islamic extremists as other Arab countries. [redacted]

According to Embassy reporting, many university students and faculty have been angered by fundamentalist harassment and activities that they believe

attract harsh security measures that interfere with their daily routine and limit normal access to the university mosque. For example, in November 1982 the press reported that fundamentalists at the Ben Aknoun campus in Algiers confronted an opposition group that had gathered to counter fundamentalist efforts to control elections for student representation on a university committee. One student died and 10 were injured after security forces arrived on the scene. Several days later students and faculty boycotted classes in protest against the death of the student and the general lack of security against fundamentalists. [redacted]

In our estimation, the military—the real backbone of the regime—has not been seriously penetrated by fundamentalists. According to the US defense attache in Algiers, officers are screened rigorously to the point that even fundamentalist leanings among family members are grounds to relegate an officer to reserve commission status. Army officers are probably the most privileged sector of Algerian society, and, in our view, they would be unsympathetic toward a movement that threatened their status. [redacted]

Among advocates of a return to stricter adherence to religious values are those with conservative religious views who primarily seek a restoration of Islam in daily life and militant fundamentalists who call for a radical change in the social and political structure of the country. Although both groups want many of the same changes, such as the prohibition of alcohol and the right to pray during work hours, their goals and their approach to effecting change differ—conservatives seek personal piety and the militants want structural changes in society. We believe that conservative activists prefer working with the government-controlled religious apparatus and are appeased by the accommodations they have extracted from the government, whereas the militant fundamentalists are willing to take a belligerent course. [redacted]

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President Bendjedid and high-level party members attend the Friday prayer at the Grand Mosque in Algiers. [redacted]



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Material published by the militant fundamentalists shows that they have no unique doctrine but advocate a variety of ideas:

- An Islamic society akin to the Libyan model.
- The meshing of Islam and socialism, citing Iran as an example.
- The formation of an Islamic government.
- The purification of society by eliminating coeducation in primary schools and instructing girls 12 or older separately.
- Prohibiting alcoholic beverages.
- Total rejection of Western values. [redacted]

fundamentalists, [redacted]

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Some members of the cabinet have good Islamic credentials, according to Embassy reports, and we believe they may advocate a more religious stance during policy discussions. For example, the Minister of Religious Affairs has traditionally been chosen because of his close ties with the Islamic and political establishments:

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#### State Monopoly of Religious Institutions

In our view, the current regime, including Bendjedid, is not inclined to change its basically secular outlook, and few of its leaders strictly follow Islamic practices themselves. US officials who deal regularly with high-level Algerian officials report that alcohol is readily available at official functions and at officers' clubs, and many Algerians still look to Europe, especially Paris, for the latest trends. In general, most officials prefer to speak French even among themselves, particularly when discussing professional matters. When Bendjedid first became President, he had difficulty giving a speech in Arabic but through study now appears comfortable in both languages. In looking for

- Earlier this year Minister of Religious Affairs Abderrahmane Chibane was temporarily detained as part of the government's crackdown on fundamentalists. We suspect that his close identification with certain conservative religious issues and his apparent hesitation in dealing forcefully with extremists made Bendjedid question his loyalty.
- Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, whose stepfather was a religious leader, retains strong ties to the Islamic religious community. He does not appear to have a fundamentalist orientation.

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According to the Constitution and decrees promulgated in 1980, the Ministry of Religious Affairs is responsible for the administration of religious institutions, the extension of Quranic education, the development of Islamic studies, and the explanation and dissemination of "socialist principles embedded in social justice—one of the essential elements of Islam." In addition, the Ministry is responsible for supervising the education of the mosques' personnel. Algerian Government data suggest that there are about 5,000 public mosques with an equal number of people in charge and a few private mosques for which there is little detailed information. [redacted]

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The most politically important religious organization in Algeria is the Islamic Superior Council, [redacted] [redacted] Presided over by the Minister of Religious Affairs, this government-appointed body is charged with the official interpretation of Islamic doctrine. Its political strength is derived from the government's need to interpret Islam to justify Bendjedid's policies. [redacted]

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The state uses various instruments to disseminate official guidelines on doctrinal matters involving religion. In addition to the 715 Islamic social groups (Jam'iyya Islamiyya) under the aegis of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, [redacted] the most effective forums are the Seminars on Islamic Thought and certain government-controlled periodicals. The government uses the Seminar on Islamic Thought, an annual gathering of theologians, philosophers, and politicians, to promote its own interpretation of Islam. *Al-Asala* and *Al-Risala* (mainly for children)—the only Islamic reviews permitted in Algeria—spread the official view regarding theology and law, particularly as they relate to current problems and events. The Ministries of Culture, Information, Justice, and Higher Education and Scientific Research are also involved in formulating and disseminating the government's line on Islam through radio programming, television, book publications, films, and cultural events. [redacted]

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- Minister of Justice Boualem Baki maintains contacts with Islamic traditionalists.
- Minister of Culture Abdelmajid Meziane, a respected scholar and former head of the University of Algiers, was educated at the Institute of Higher Islamic Studies in Rabat.

On balance, however, we believe that these cabinet members would not publicly challenge Bendjedid's policies or vigorously lobby for more conservative religious practices. [redacted]

Except for some private mosques, the entire religious apparatus has been in the hands of the state since independence; most imams and leaders of the religious organizations and schools are appointed by the government. Each regime since independence has used the apparatus to strengthen its Islamic credentials and control religious expression. The state religious establishment, in our view, has tended to support the regime's policies over the years. [redacted]

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*A mosque near Ghardaia in the M'zab region of the northern central Sahara. One of the smallest Berber population centers, the M'zab is known for the Kharidjite refugees, a small, reclusive Islamic sect, who in the 10th century fled the Shiism imposed by the Fatimid dynasty to establish a theocratic kingdom. The absence of structural or ornamental enhancements of the mosques is a reflection of M'zabite society even today—withdrawn religious austerity.* [redacted]



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#### Government Reaction

Embassy [redacted] sources indicate that the Algerian Government takes seriously the need to respond to some demands of religious conservatives. The state has tried to demonstrate its orthodoxy and has given proof of its respect for Muslim tradition in a number of ways. The official day of rest was changed to Friday in 1976 to correspond with tradition. The Family Code is under review again to comply more with demands from conservative activists and the militant fundamentalists. Bendjedid's recent anticorruption campaign, although largely designed to check his rivals, has been packaged to apply Quranic principles to government personnel. The government also recently declared its intention to strengthen religious education by promising to open about 160 Quranic schools by 1986. [redacted]

[redacted] the government believes that the poor quality of state imams (prayer leaders) is a major factor in the spread of private Islam and the diminution of its control over religious ideas. Government officials publicly admitted in January 1981 that three-fifths of the state imams were not qualified to comment on the Quran and Sunna (deeds and statements of the Prophet). As a remedy

the government is making various attempts to upgrade the education of its imams in the hope they will regain control of religion. For example, a central postgraduate institute and new Islamic institutes for each province have been created. Thus, students will no longer have to go abroad to get a diploma, nor will they be so easily exposed to "reform" ideas. [redacted]

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Bendjedid is taking other measures to diffuse the potential appeal of fundamentalism by:

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- Deemphasizing the contributions of former President Boumediene and elevating revolutionary heroes whose religious credentials are more acceptable to the fundamentalists.
- Constructing new state mosques.
- Stressing publicly the attention to Islam given by his own administration. [redacted]

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Furthermore, a campaign is under way to generate support among the intellectual elite for the government's orthodoxy and method for dealing with Islamic extremists. Arabic-speaking intellectuals who have generally taken a backseat to their French-speaking

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counterparts are being promoted as Algeria's new cultural leadership. Hoping to appear more open-minded, [redacted] the Bendjedid regime has permitted well-known Islamic theorists and scholars to publish books that deviate slightly from the state version of Islam. [redacted]

Another tactic of the regime has been to be surprisingly open in promoting its policy toward fundamentalists and extremists, particularly regarding the use of force. Government leaders have repeatedly warned that Islamic extremists should not mistake patience and tolerance for weakness, implying that the regime will use whatever means necessary to deal with fundamentalist activity. The state-controlled newspaper, *El-Moudjahid*, has given widespread and generally accurate coverage of the violent demonstrations and the subsequent arrests that took place late last year. We believe the government probably hopes that, by making a public example of those involved in religious activities against the regime, they will discredit the extremists and discourage the appeal of fundamentalism. [redacted]

Since the crackdown last year, we have not seen any fundamentalist-related disturbances. In our view, Bendjedid's hardline policy has diffused the movement at least on the surface and for the short term. We believe that, as in other Arab countries, the underlying causes of fundamentalism in Algeria have not been sufficiently resolved by the regime to have eradicated the problem. [redacted]

**Outlook**

Although Islamic fundamentalists will probably gain appeal among Algeria's students and urban youth—who have identified more closely with fundamentalist demands in the past—we believe that they are not a serious threat to the regime at this time. The fundamentalist movement suffers from a lack of leadership, without which it has no clear strategy for political action. Furthermore, the fundamentalists appear to be at odds with Algeria's other opposition groups. They are the ideological archenemy of the clandestine Communist Party, and they are perceived by the Berbers—already politically and socially alienated from the Arab majority—as a movement that would

further diminish their position in society. The fundamentalist movement's threat to the regime is further reduced by an effective security network that closely monitors the militants. [redacted]

In our view, the lack of sympathy with fundamentalist ideals by a majority of Algerians is the greatest deterrent to the spread of the movement. We believe Algerians, in general, are more attracted by consumerism than by the ascetic lifestyle espoused by the fundamentalists. Moreover, most Algerians support Bendjedid's regime and are confident of its ability to govern Algeria. Algerians may gravitate toward more conservative religious practices, but this seems to be more a reflection of personal preference than a desire to seriously alter the country's political and social order. [redacted]

In our opinion, however, as long as the Bendjedid government remains unresponsive to the root causes of social tensions—and most specifically the dislocations resulting from the industrialization and Arabization programs—there will be criticism and occasional violence by Islamic extremists. [redacted]

**Implications for the United States**

We believe that the surge of Muslim activism in Algeria will not interfere with the current trend toward improved US-Algerian relations.<sup>1</sup> The issue of Islamic fundamentalism, in our opinion, has not reached the level of heated national debate and certainly has not become a factor in shaping Algeria's foreign policy. The government has felt secure enough in its policy toward fundamentalism to take on such major changes in foreign policy as improving ties with the United States. Algeria's efforts as a broker between the United States and Iran to end the hostage crisis indicate, in our analysis, that the government feels confident about its own Islamic credentials.

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Washington, however, will be dealing with a government that wishes for a variety of reasons—including its concern over Islamic resurgence—not to appear to be a client or supplicant of the West or a superpower. Although the recent visit by the US Vice President to Algeria was given high visibility, Algiers will continue, as it did during the visit, to characterize its broadening relationship with the United States as an outgrowth of its responsibilities as a leader of the nonaligned movement.

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Events like the Iranian revolution and Sadat's assassination at the hands of fundamentalists no doubt have brought home to the Algerian Government the dangers of unchecked, rampant Islamic activism. As a result, we expect the Algerians to be more sympathetic to moderate Arab concerns and to pursue policies compatible with US concerns regarding the spread of fundamentalism throughout the Muslim world.

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