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TIME TO RESET Relations with Algeria

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French political leaders can be past masters at fighting yesterday's wars. As they endlessly argue about whether or not they should apologize for the violence which characterised the 132 years during which they colonised Africa's largest country and ended in a bloody, they are in danger of losing track of more recent developments which have made Algiers a much sought after interlocutor in major world capitals.

Fighting yesterday's wars is also a well practised sport among Algeria's political elite. Some of its members still dream of the 1960s and 70s when their country was a proxy for the revolutionary state and a model for the developing world. The Algeria of those years did make a noteworthy contribution to genuine liberation movements as it trained ANC and OLP fighters. Old timers err however when they pretend that the often disparaging comments on Algeria expressed by French politicians and media represent the views of those 20% of the French population who have close links with Algeria.

The geopolitical map of the world has completely changed since Algeria gained its independence. Turmoil in Tunisia, Libya and Mali points to an unstable region on Europe's doorstep. The incapacity of the United Nations to broker an internationally acceptable solution for the future of the disputed Western Sahara has morphed into a much wider security threat to the whole Saharan belt of Africa. What threatens Europe today is not some unlikely alliance of Muslims against the West but an exacerbation of nationalist ambitions, be it manipulated by major powers from outside the region or just responding to complex internal politics.

In the meantime, access to major sources of energy, phosphates and uranium and transporting it from producer to end user will likely define the way major powers conduct their foreign policy in the North West Africa, where the quest for a renewed form of stability will require an extra effort for everybody in the region. Unfortunately, growing instability in the region has met, so far, with an absence of European policy while the US is not yet clear as to whether the EU will develop a coherent strategy to confront a problem which, if unattended, will leave a potential trail of failed states across countries awash with weapons which flowed out of Libya in 2011

and 2012. The thirty year Mexican standoff between Algeria and Morocco explains why the only two countries in the region which boast a functioning army, security service and foreign policy are unwilling to cooperate.

As early as 1969, a Catalan businessman articulated a strategic vision of relations with Algeria and North Africa which has paid handsome dividends to this day: Pere Duran Farrell brought Algerian gas to Barcelona. Years after he died, his name was given to the gas pipeline which links Algeria, via Morocco, to Spain and Portugal. That energy link is key to relations between Spain and Algeria. Spanish businessmen got to know Tunisia and Morocco in the 1990s but forgot Algeria: pushed by the crisis in Spain, Algeria's stability and wealth, Spanish companies are rediscovering the road to Algeria: flights from Barcelona, Alicante and Madrid to Algiers and Oran are fully booked, Algerians are buying ever more properties in the Levante – all of which could encourage Spain to play its part in a reset of EU relations with Algeria. The recent visit to Algeria by the president of the Spanish government, Mariano Rajoy, could thus be much more important than appears at first sight. It certainly is not simply a question of protocol.

And yet not only Spain but the entire EU should engage in a more pro-active policy in the Maghreb. France holds one key card in this game: if one includes those Frenchmen of Algerian Muslim descent, many of whom are doing well in France today, the former pieds noirs European settlers and tens of thousands of Sephardic Jews, most of whom settled in France rather than Israel after Algeria's independence in 1962, one striking fact emerges: one in five Frenchmen have family links with Algeria. This intimacy, the fact that Algerians know France better than any other foreign nationals; that millions of French families, however bitter the traumas of the 1950s and early 60s may be, have deep roots across the Mediterranean, point to a complex web of family and economic interests which stretch back to 1830, the year the French army conquered Algiers.

This web of relations suggests that the domestic security of France depends to no mean degree on the quality of its relations with Algeria. In turn Algerian fears, at times exaggerated, of French meddling on its borders need to be laid to rest. The factors of destabilisation which play across the region offer ample opportunity for each country to destabilise the other.

By all means Europe needs to update its vision of Algeria. Spain, France and the EU should be mindful of three factors when they look at Algeria. Young Algerians – those under the age of 30 account for two thirds of the country's 36m population, are much better educated than their elders and well apprised of the real world beyond their shores. They are critical of their rulers but also of Europe's hypocrisy in its dealings with the Middle East and the condescension they are held in. They aspire to a new deal at home, they want their rulers to respect them, cut corruption and frame a policy which offers more diversified jobs, but they also want to be able to get to know Europe better.

Algeria has reluctantly re-emerged as a key player in North West Africa. It can choose to contribute to regional stability or retrench behind a brittle nationalism. The second path will not spare Algeria the different challenges which face the region as a whole. France however can do much to avoid needling Algeria. The attitude of the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy as he led the NATO which backed overthrow of Colonel Gaddafi did not go down well in Algiers – French special services operating near the country's borders are, for obvious historical reasons, anathema to Algerian leaders. Algerian leaders are chess players, something Pere Duran Farrell well understood – to engage them with any chance of success, one has to think long term.

If the EU fails to reset its relations with Algeria, the US might be willing to step into the vacuum. Will President Hollande dare face down the strong anti-Algerian lobby

in France and advance the case for greater security in the west Mediterranean region when he visits Algeria? Will Spain dare think beyond the Barcelona Process? If France, Spain and the EU choose conviction above expediency they would help put the West Mediterranean region and North Africa back on the world map. It is not only a matter of justice, it is a matter of survival.