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The Algerian Position on the European Neighbourhood Policy

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Causes of Scepticism and Reasons for Evolution

Algeria and the whole of Europe have always maintained close relations dictated by geographical proximity, cultural affinities and a certain amount of economic interdependence, particularly in the energy sector. The legal framework of these relations has evolved from the May 1976 EEC-Algeria Cooperation Agreement to today’s Association Agreement, signed under the Spanish EU Presidency in Valencia on 19 April 2002 and entering into force on 1 September 2005. In 2004, when the Association Agreement had not yet entered into force because it had not yet been adopted by all parliaments of EU Member States (the last parliament to take this step was that of the Netherlands in June 2005), the EU launched its so-called European Neighbourhood Policy initiative, originally designed for Central and Eastern European countries not intending to enter the EU. This initiative, highly ambitious moreover, as President Romano Prodi summed it up in his renowned phrase, “everything but the institutions,” was met in Algiers with undisguised reserve, as much for reasons inherent to the content of the initiative and the approach adopted as for considerations regarding the Algerian reality.

Reservations Regarding Approach and Content

Algeria’s reservations first had to do with appropriation, since it is incontestable that the European party developed its ENP proposal with no prior consultation with the initiative’s potential beneficiaries. The Algerian government considered such an attitude against the spirit of a partnership that was meant to build relations between the North and South shores of the Mediterranean. The explanations supplied by the EU to justify this attitude were hardly convincing from the Algerian perspective. How could they lend credence to an argument consisting of saying that they were unable to organise consultation because the project designed for Central and Eastern Europe had been extended to the South Mediterranean countries at the last minute? Moreover, the Neighbourhood instrument clearly speaks of sharing European values, which did not fail to evoke the idea of a European hegemony over the ENP. That goes for the approach. Insofar as the project’s content, Algeria has always refused to hold the view according to which Europe plays the role of doling out “carrot-and-stick” rewards and reprimands. The conditionality underpinning the Neighbourhood Policy appears to many as the expression of a hackneyed view of relations between Europe and the South shore of the Mediterranean in which one party assumes the lovely role of sermonizer and distributor of brownie points to unruly pupils who need to be set back on the right track. Without rejecting the European initiative, Algiers expressed certain reservations regarding this logic, which intends financial aid and deepening of cooperation to be proportional to the progress made, in particular in the sphere of human rights, but without the latter factor being sufficiently taken into account in the management of migratory flows and the signature of readmission agreements. Such a position is justified, from the Algerian perspective, by the conviction that democratic evolution is above all an internal demand that should be handled domestically, regardless of any international pressure. This attitude can be as-
cribed to the fact that Algeria, for historical reasons associated with its struggle for independence as well as with the combat that it has carried out and continues to carry out against terrorism and its international ramifications, has developed major sensitivity regarding issues of sovereignty and interference. The latest events relating to the attack at the Tiguentourine gas plant have demonstrated that this approach currently remains a determining factor in relations between Algeria and its international environs. It should be noted that voices are being raised within Algeria itself calling for a revision of this concept, which could seem obsolete in a world of interdependence where the concept of border loses its pertinence. Such voices remain marginal, however, among a public opinion and government that are very punctilious on matters of sovereignty.

Algeria, for historical reasons associated with its struggle for independence as well as with the combat that it continues to carry out against terrorism and its international ramifications, has developed major sensitivity regarding issues of sovereignty and interference. Moreover, the reservations expressed by Algeria regarding conditionality, positive though it may be – “more for more” –, can also be attributed to the fact that Algeria’s financial situation renders it less vulnerable before Europe than some of its neighbouring countries. Certain analysts are tempted to refute this argument by pointing out, and rightly so, Algeria’s acceptance of conditionality, in this case negative conditionality, as contained in the Association Agreements, since the latter can be suspended in case of human rights violations. From a collective psychology perspective, it is easier for Algerians to accept positive conditionality, for they feel, not without reason, that they have won significant acquis insofar as freedoms and they therefore have no complexes in this regard. On the other hand, they find it much more difficult to accept that the driving force of their evolution should come from outside, on a “carrot-stick” policy basis, which can be perceived as humiliating or degrading. In addition, Algeria considers that the reality of Central and Eastern European countries is far too different from that of South Mediterranean countries for a single inclusive approach to be applied to all of them. This difference can be noted in both the expectations regarding relations with Europe and the perception of those relations.

Reservations Arising from the Algerian Context

Considerations relative to the Algerian context have played a substantial role in defining Algeria’s position on the ENP.

- The first simply consists of a problem of timing, not without significant political implications. In fact, the European ENP proposal for Algeria was made when the Association Agreement had not even entered into force. This Agreement has given rise to impassioned debate, then and now, on the opportunity and its implications for the Algerian economy. Both the business community and political actors decried the government’s decision to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, qualifying it as imbalanced, in particular in the component regarding the establishment of a free trade area. To grasp the risk, suffice it to recall that the Algerian economy today is still a mono-export economy, the hydrocarbon share of export revenue being between 97% and 98%, whereas the oil revenue in the national budget is evaluated at 75%. These parameters lent the Association Agreement bad press in Algeria, since the stated business community and political actors did not hesitate to speak of a give-away to the benefit of Europe with nothing in return. Under these conditions, from the perspective of political management, it was difficult, to say the least, to receive another European initiative favourably when the primary aim was to popularise and gain acceptance for the Association Agreement.
- Another domestic factor has conditioned Algeria’s position on the ENP. Algerian diplomacy has always expressed a sort of annoyance at Europe’s tendency to opt for a logic of “sedimentation” of initiatives. Perhaps mistakenly, one gets the im-
pression that Europe, to mask the shortcomings of an initiative or its outright failure, decided to propose a new project, thus inflating the legal framework of cooperation and partnership.

Reasons for the Evolution of the Algerian Position

Over the course of 2011, Algerian diplomacy showed signs of evolution concerning its position on the ENP. This evolution led to the initiation, as of 24 January 2012, of preliminary discussions on the adoption of an Action Plan that would formally establish Algeria’s accession to the new Neighbourhood Policy. Indeed, on 25 May 2011, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs issued a joint communication entitled “A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood.” Algeria has detected significant progress in the new European approach:

- Insofar as appropriation, in contrast to the launching stage of the ENP, the countries to the South, in particular Algeria, were consulted and joined in discussing the new conception of the Neighbourhood Policy;
- Insofar as the Algerian specificity, the European party has expressed willingness to implement an Action Plan taking into account certain Algerian idiosyncrasies, in particular the mono-export structure of its economy;
- Finally, Algerian diplomacy seems to have taken advantage of the opportunity of the new Neighbourhood Policy strategy to send Europe a strong message of openness and, more generally, to express a more decided will to join in integrative political and economic measures. This is all the more true since the Algerian approach cannot be due to financial considerations, because in this respect, the country is quite at ease and does not expect any particular financial support from Europe.

At present, preliminary discussions are still underway and the negotiations to establish an Action Plan are, according to the actors involved, taking place in a favourable climate that heralds forthcoming implementation. Two rounds of discussion have already taken place, with a third round planned for May. In reality, though there has been an undeniable change in Algeria’s position on the ENP, it can in no way be likened to a revolution, since Algeria has already “acted as a neighbour” without officially forming part of the ENP: it has undertaken actions within the logic of the ENP as part of the Association Agreements, though they did not form part of an official action plan.

In conclusion, beyond the vicissitudes associated with the evolution of Algeria’s position on the ENP, the fundamental issue consists of Europe’s capacity to employ the appropriate tools for a true partnership, in particular with regard to South Mediterranean countries, a region where Europe is experiencing increasing competition with emerging countries. Indeed, there is a considerable risk of South Mediterranean countries turning towards new partners with both greater financial means than a Europe in crisis and less demands insofar as conditionality.

For countries experiencing full political transition and, for some, economic transition as well, meeting the criteria of “deep democracy” described in the 25 May 2011 communication as “solid and sustainable democracy” cannot but constitute a major challenge. On this basis, the European Union will be hard pressed to assess the progress of each of these countries – often dealing with situations of confusion and that continually oscillate between progress and regression – through follow-up annual reports. By the same token, can financial allocations for recipient countries for 2014 and beyond be determined solely on the basis of respect for the ENP reference criteria when we know that the reduction of EU aid may have serious consequences in certain countries, in the sense that they would create conditions of increased instability and heighten uncertainty concerning political and economic development throughout the Euro-Mediterranean Region?

This dilemma, not new but more acute today, should serve as a good opportunity to consider the definition of a new EU approach to its Neighbourhood, particularly the South Mediterranean Region, an approach that would establish the economy as the focal point, for only conditions of economic growth and development are capable of ensuring stability and the success of democratic transitions. “More for more” should become “more investment & development for more democracy”; any other approach would be risky at best and rash or irresponsible at worst.