

A Review of: “Algeria: Politics and Society from the Dark Decade to the Hirak” by Michael J. Willis¹²

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In 2007/8, as a student at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, I had the opportunity to learn one academic year in Kuwait University, and besides studying, I had time to travel around the region, so I have some insights how the Middle East and North Africa works. Because I had some experience directly from the Arab speaking countries, this enables me little to understand better the culture and the thinking of the Arabic people. However, there is a lot more to learn. A decade later, after some serious scientific work I am now finishing my PhD-dissertation and after that I intend to specialize in Algeria and Morocco, thus the area might become my field of expertise later (of course after years of humble efforts). Thanks to hard work, I was accepted into the prestigious Africa Research Institute in Hungary (created in 2019), which enables me to concentrate more on the area.

However, the theme of my review is Michael J. Willis’s work on Algeria, which – according to my previous experiences and after writing some reviews already – is a thorough and excellent work, which includes few typos or the like. I especially liked the dedication, with what the writer made efforts to collect data on the country by doing surveys (primary sources) on the country in Algiers between 2015-17. The use of secondary sources is also impressive, and the bibliography includes fresh and relevant sources. The reading material is abundant on the theme, however – in my opinion – it succeeded not only in describing the situation in Algeria but also giving new insights into what might lie in the future of the country after the 2019 revolution, the Hirak. His style is fluent, and he tries to include other opinions for a better scientific understanding, which is a great value of a scholar. The reader can sense that the author – who works at the prestigious Oxford University – is fluent in the area, and he published several books before on the theme as well, that became popular. Concluding all, it is an honour for me to have the opportunity to review a book with such high standards and only minor errors.

After giving my first impressions on the book, I think it is important to look through, what is the writer analysing and what themes he did consider important. In the first chapter, he gives a comprehensive outlook of the first presidents of the country after independence, and then tries to give a description for the average reader as well to understand, what the beginnings of Algerian politics were like in the first decades after the independence was

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reached in 1962. He concentrates a lot on the independence movement, which he thinks was one of the main motives for later Algerian politics and it has been shaped by it (15). He continues with the Ben Bella, Boumedienne, and Benjedid governments, which he describes quite thoroughly. He examines the socialist direction these leaders took when they were presidents. In the last (Benjedid's) president's time, the Islamist power got prominence and the FIS was created, what Willis describes well to the audience. After this, he goes on to mention some other presidents (like Zeroual), who were only for a short time in rule.

In the second chapter, Willis aims to examine one of the most important eras of the Algerian politics, which took place under the supervision and rule of Bouteflika. The former foreign minister was very skilled in diplomacy, and as Willis describes, he restored the prestige of the Algerian state abroad and had a good relationship with the security services, which was called DRS. Bouteflika was president for several years, and he thwarted his enemies mostly with the help of his security services. His partnership with Mediene, head of DRS made him very powerful in the country's political sphere (74). In his third campaign, he amended the constitution, so he could become president for the third time. His third era was signalled by a coup effort from the DRS, which was unsuccessful. The 2010 Arabic springs didn't have a major effect on the country, as Willis describes, the reaction of the DRS was enough to control the events in Algeria not to get out of hand. In his fourth term, Bouteflika improved Algeria's foreign image more and showed his rule as benevolent in the eyes of foreign powers. However, he had a stroke in 2013, nevertheless, he ran for fifth time as president. The former chief of staff, Gaid Salah tried to take the power, but he was too weak, and finally – as Willis describes – Abdelmajid Tebboune became president, after the Hirak (the Algerian demonstrations in 2019) made Bouteflika resign. Tebboune had a difficult time with the protests and the COVID-19, so his rule was not as smooth as he thought of it before. At the end of the chapter, Willis states that the most important element of the elite politics of Algeria were the security services (the DRS and the ANP), which took a great part in the shaping of the politics of the country.

In the third chapter, Willis tries to capture the essence of the 1990s Islamist movements and threats, how the government tried to handle them. Willis thinks that to understand the politics of the 21st century, one must get acquainted with the events of the Islamist era in the country. After initial conflicts and terrorist attacks by Islamists, a more radical organization came into being, which was called GIA. Another radical group was created from the FIS, the AIS in 1994. This meant of course more extremism in the country. In the clashes 30,000 people died, and from 1993 to 1996, the government had to issue counter-insurgency movements. According to Willis, in the last years of the 90s, from 1997 on the Islamist threat and the influence of the FIS was successfully decreased, also by an amnesty given by president Zeroual on 20 August 1997. With Bouteflika in power – as Willis describes – he issued the Civil Concord Law, which gave amnesty to the non-violent members of the FIS, thus he guaranteed a national reconciliation for the moderate Islamists. On 14 August 2005, Bouteflika amended this Concord by implementing the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, which gave compensation to the families who suffered under the Islamists and the charter also aimed to

exclude the Islamists from political life. Willis thinks that despite the GSCP – another Islamist group – came to power in the 2000s, and established relations with the AQIM, jihadism has never really become popular in Algeria (123), and the Islamist threat soon decreased.

After explaining the Islamist movements and their roots, Willis turns to describe the politics and economics of Algeria. The first thing Willis mentions, is that oil was discovered in the country in 1956, which had a huge effect on the country's economics later on. The oil and gas company, Sonatrach had a huge import not only nationwide, but regionally as well. As Willis describes, the oil prices started to fall in the 80s, which continued well into the 90s, so in 1994 finally Algeria had to take an international loan from the IMF to keep up the economy. However, after the rise of Bouteflika in 1999, the oil prices went up, so he had a lot of opportunities, and he could get closer with his economic entrepreneurs instead of relying totally on the DRS. An economic association was created by the name of FCE in 2000. There became a symbiosis between Bouteflika and the FCE, the business circles, which had won him most of his presidential elections (149). Willis tells us, that besides the rising corruption, with the increasing oil revenues, Bouteflika was able to expand the economy and invest into economic developments. The oil prices however went down in 2014, which caused some serious problems for the country's economy. Eventually the demise of the bad economic circumstances was shown in the Hirak movement, in which both the president and his economic circles were deposed of. In 2020, with the COVID-19 the economy was startled, and unemployment and inflation became a problem in Algeria.

In the fifth chapter, Willis aims to examine the political opposition that existed in the country, and which culminated in the Hirak movement, which proved to be a decisive factor in the country's history. Altogether, there were not many opposition parties in Algeria, in the beginning, in the time of the independence fights, it was the FLN, which came to be the government's party later. In 1982, the MDA came with Ahmed Ben Bella, and the communist party enjoyed somewhat legal status (PAGS). From the 80s on, there were at least 50 smaller opposition parties, among which the Islamist FIS became important later. In the 1992 elections, the FIS was excluded, and after that, for a decade, only radical Islamist opposition was present in the country. From 1997, a new opposition force, the RND was established, and the FLN became important again. At the time of the Arab Spring in 2010, a party called CNCD was created, but it didn't have much effect on Algerian politics. The only bigger Islamist party (besides the previous FIS), that won recognition was the MSP, which later merged with other Islamist parties. By some years there were small opposition parties, which didn't have big share in Algerian politics, these meant the CNLTD, which comprised of: MSP, An-Nahda, FJD, FFS, RCD, Jil Jadid. No matter the Hirak was coming, the opposition didn't gain any ground, and after the turmoil, the FLN-RND won back its previous power. In Willis's opinion, the opposition was little bit financed by the government, so it could control them, and this way they didn't disturb really the politics of the ruling, influential elite (203). Willis also tells us, that there was a small room for associations to rise and take part in politics, as long as they could be controlled by the government. In the time of Bouteflika, these groups provided the regime's bases for international recognition. Besides of some students, young people, there



was no real opposition to the regime, and this was shown in the 2010 events, when the Arab Spring didn't have any effect on the country. The Hirak, however was another story, as it really achieved a slightly independent status from the government, basing their power on associations and trade guilds. In Willis's opinion, the Hirak gave room for the new generation of students and youth, who were born after the independence fights and wanted something new, but eventually, with Tebboune, the government at least could ease the tensions against the movement. One of the main ideas of Willis is that these movements were actually peaceful, and it was thus because the bloody years of the 90s taught Algerians what violence means.

In the sixth chapter, Willis considers the Algerian politics and society, which is important for understanding the country. In the opinion of Willis, Algerian people are disinterested by politics, since they think it's corrupt and elections are thought to be fraudulent. Willis notes, that the young generation is the most disillusioned with the political life of the country, not lastly because unemployment for them is very high. Willis says that there is a gap between the younger, disillusioned generation, who is looked down by the older generation, because they think they have unreachable standards, as they fought for the independence, while the young people didn't. Willis says the young people are prone more to participate in demonstrations like the Hirak, and they use social media, internet and the like more, so they are a new generation. In Willis's view there is a common thinking in Algerian people's mind that the 90s terrorist attacks and threats were part of a foreign intrusion into the country's political life, they usually think it was a confusing time and they speak about it as the "dark" or "black" decade. Willis thinks the 2019 Hirak shows that the people still remember the effects of the 90s violence, and they don't want that aggression back (240-241), but also the younger generation is too small to remember what happened and they look on things with a rather new perspective as they participate in the Hirak. However, after the 2000s, the civilian religious life had a positive impact, and people started to take religion in personal life more importantly. For them, the first identity factor is religion, then comes Algerianness, and there is Arabness as well. Women are rarely represented in political life, and it only decreased in the last years compared to older times, when it even totalled in 25% representation in National Assembly (2017). Today, it barely reaches 9%. Nevertheless, they were strongly represented in the Hirak movement, because women's rights are becoming more and more important even in this region as well. Concerning other identity factors, tribe and regions are not the most relevant factors, however, family is one of the most important things in Algerian social life. There is small educational development, however, mostly young people are prone to new influences like social media and internet. Willis thinks that the years that have passed since independence showed that the younger generation wants democratic change, which culminated in the 2019 Hirak movements, which were peaceful and demanded a new, democratic approach to government. That they will be successful, or not remains to be seen according to Willis.

In the seventh chapter, the author tries to comprehend the so-called revolutionary regions of Algeria, the Kabyle region, the Mزاب and the Saharan South. Before even discussing the

regions, Willis notes that they are not secessionist in nature, however, they are restive regions. In April-July 2001, there was a revolt in Kabylia, which aspired for reform, but eventually, it didn't last long, and it haven't achieved its goals. This was called "Black Spring". In the South, where there is Sahara, and it's far from the center, a revolt started in 2013, and continued in 2015, because of economic reasons, but the organization, which directed these demonstrations, the CNDDC had to merge with some government powers, thus it lost its influence, and the revolution faded away. In the Mزاب, there was an ethno-religious problem between two tribes: the Mozabites were Ibadis and Berbers, while the Chamba were Arabs and Malikites, who were semi-nomadic people, and this culminated in troubles in 2013-15. After describing the revolts, Willis tries to give common reasons for the occurring enmities. First thing he explains to be common in nature was the high level of unemployment and marginalization. He looks at the revolt from the ethnicity perspective as well: he concludes that in Kabylia, in spite of a lot of opinions, the Berber identity (which is present in the area) was not the main reason of the tensions (302). I personally think that the protests were also of ethnic nature, as the Berber roots are important for the people of this region, however, Willis' idea is to be considered and his thoughts are generally excellent. He also tries to prove, that ethnicity had no impact on the Mزاب conflict, rather the Ibadi-Malikite enmity was important. Here I also would like to add, that in my opinion, the Berber-Arab differences could also be a factor in the clashes between the two ethnic groups, however, Willis's opinion is very interesting in nature. In the south, he is on the same opinion, and my thought is the same about the theme as well, however, ethnical differences are not so strong in that region. Beside these, Willis has another interesting thought, which I think might be true, that these regions – instead of secession – want more integration into their homeland. To conclude the three regions, Willis says that they all want more piece of the national cake rather than to secede from the Algerian state. Then Willis considers the foreign influence accusation in the three revolts, which he thinks are mostly unfounded and are rumours.

In the last, eighth chapter, Willis concludes his book by describing Algeria in the international world. Willis summarizes the experienced Algerian diplomacy's rules in the following: non-interference, supporter of independence movements and the importance of national sovereignty (337). Thus, after the Cold War it gained a reputation for being a good mediator in the diplomatic life. During the 90s, it became isolated because of the Islamist terrorist attacks, and sense of distrust became apparent from foreign governments and organizations. After the time of Bouteflika (who was foreign minister before) Algeria recovered from the isolation, and its former reputation had been reinstated. After 9/11, Algeria became very important as a major participant in the global war against terrorism. Algeria thwarted the Arab Spring uprisings, so national sovereignty was still important for it, and it could fill the gaps Gadhafi and Ben Ali left after themselves in the MENA region. After some incidents which involved hostage taking at the borders of the country with Libya, it changed its non-interventionist policies slightly, and defended its borders with at least 100,000 soldiers. After this, Willis examines Algeria's foreign relations on three levels: neighbours; US, France, EU and Russia, China, Sub-Saharan Africa and Middle East. In the case

of its neighbours, Algeria stayed rather indifferent in the case of Mali and the Sahel, mainly earning the reputation as a mediator. In Libya, it condemned the NATO incursions in 2013, and it remained neutral. With Tunisia, it maintained a restrained, but good relationship. The enmity with Morocco is a longstanding issue, since the 1963 Sand War, their relationship was stained, and in 1994 they even closed borders. There was also the problem of Western Sahara, in which Algeria supported the Polisario and the referendum for the area, while Morocco wanted ownership. On 24 August 2021, Algeria broke even diplomatic ties with Morocco – due to the recent recognition of the country’s rights to Western Saharan territory by the US – and even closed its gas pipeline to the country. Taking into consideration Western powers, Willis says the relationship of Algeria with France was an old and sometimes problematic one, since the Algerians were sensitive of their independence from them. However, after 1999 with Bouteflika, relations became better, as the two countries still had a lot in common on the economic and political field. Algeria was not so satisfied with the EU’s partnership programs as well, and demanded more of an effort from the European organization. With the US, it enjoyed better relations, as it imported gas from them, and after Bouteflika, the fight against terrorism brought the two powers closer to each other. Then Willis goes on to consider the Middle East: he thinks that Algeria had cold but correct relations with the Arab states, and it condemned the Israeli actions in Palestine. After 2019, Tebboune improved relations with both Saudi Arabia and Turkey. With Russia, Algeria had generally good relationship, and it became the largest arms importer from the eastern power, which strengthened the relations between Algeria and Putin, so it didn’t condemn Russia’s actions in Ukraine officially. With China, relations started early, in 1958, and went on well. They created good political and diplomatic relations, but their economic cooperation was not so prominent.

In the Conclusion chapter, Willis looks on the future of Algeria, and states that the leadership, the economy and the society of Algeria was slowly changed, and this culminated in the 2019 Hirak movement. Willis cites a sociologist, Nacer Djabi, who thinks that after the independence generation, a second and a third grew up, and especially the third was a more active and Western-influenced youthful generation, which wanted and still wants changes in the political life of Algeria (410-411). Willis finishes by saying that although in 2022, the Hirak movement faded away, he thinks that in some way, the needs for change from this young generation will find a form for it to be expressed again. This is, what the author expects from the future of Algeria.

In conclusion, it can be said that the book is a thorough and excellent interpretation of Algeria from every way possible, and the author can be praised for that. Most of the views he has are well founded, there are only minor things I could debate with, but altogether the work can be considered very important in the field of research concerning the North African and the MENA region. Therefore, I can only recommend to researchers and also ordinary readers the book if they want to get to know better the North African country, or if they want to do further research based on these grounds.