Nuclear and WMD proliferation: A View from Algeria

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Algeria’s position on nuclear and WMD proliferation must be understood in the context of, on the one hand, the country’s commitment to both nuclear non-proliferation and the on-going struggle against CBRN terrorism in North Africa, and, on the other hand, its development of a civil nuclear program. Algeria’s policy direction is supportive of a ME WMD Free Zone, leaving open the possibility of North African regional participation to bolster the initiative.

Algeria’s situation

As a state of the MENA region, Algeria is openly committed to the fight against the acquisition and dissemination of weapons of mass destruction. This position is tied to a number of historical and political reasons: Algeria has suffered, and continues to suffer, from the effects of the French nuclear tests in 1962-1963 in the Algerian Sahara (Aïn Necker and Aïn Salah in particular). In addition, though not covered by WMD conventions, Algerians suffered attacks with incendiary weapons (napalm) during their war of independence (1954-1962) and, there remain hundreds of kilometres of antipersonnel mines along the East and West borders. More recently, during the 1990s, Islamist radicals tried to use biological weapons against populations and infrastructure through poisoning of water towers and dams in the East of the capital Algiers.1

The Algerian economy has a number of vulnerabilities to terrorist attacks: the country’s hydrocarbon infrastructure – such as its West and East petrochemical zones, its oil and gas fields in the South (Sahara), as well as its oil and gas pipelines network – is a particular cause of concern due to the concentration of facilities. For these reasons, Algerian public opinion and the Algerian authorities have consistently been aware of the importance of protection and the fight against these types of terrorist threats.

On the nuclear side, Algeria has two experimental nuclear reactors for civil and scientific use, in Draria and Aïn Oussera, which are subject to regular controls of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Algeria has made use of civil nuclear energy in research projects in the fields of health, agriculture and water. Moreover, Algeria developed national legislation and regulation to manage the risks attendant to a civilian nuclear program at an early stage, particularly focusing on civil nuclear safety in industry and nuclear medicine because of the experience in the 1970s in Sétif of radiation effects on the population from welding control devices.

The reality of developing electronuclear plants is imminent, greatly helped by the availability of uranium deposits in the Algerian Sahara. For these reasons, and to prepare for the post-oil era, in 2007 Algeria concluded nuclear cooperation agreements with both the United States and France and also renewed ones signed in the mid-1980s with Argentina and China. It plans to acquire, in 2020, a first nuclear plant for electricity production and intends to buy one every five years following.

1 Personal communication with MoD CoS Maj. Gen. Lamari on 3 February 2003
Commitment to nuclear non-proliferation

Convinced of the goals of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, Algeria signed the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1995. Furthermore, following approval from the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) it undertook to sign the additional protocol of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, although this is still under negotiation.

On this subject, Susan Burk, special envoy of President Obama in charge of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, on a visit to Algeria in February 2010 stated that Algeria and the United States share the same opinion on the reinforcement of NPT, based on 3 elements: nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy. She also expressed support for the Algerian civil nuclear program, and described Algeria as an important partner with which the United States intends to work closely, to move forward all commitments within the framework of the NPT.2

In terms of doctrine regarding the nuclear issue, Algeria advocates for:
- A non-discriminatory and non-selective approach to NPT implementation;
- Security guarantees for non-nuclear weapon states;
- Reinforcement of the implementation of Article I of the NPT, in which the states parties are committed not to help, encourage, or induce the non-nuclear weapons states to acquire such weapons in any way whatsoever;
- Acceleration of the process of entry-into-force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty;
- Recognition of nuclear energy as available to all states as a means of development and progress in the scientific and energy fields.

CBRN Defense against terrorism

Algeria signed and ratified the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) in 1975 and the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1995. Algeria has a huge network of biological, veterinary, and agronomic schools and faculties, the most important one being the biological faculty of the University of Algiers where researchers are fellows or corresponding members of the American Biological Society. With respect to pharmaceuticals, Algeria has developed a laboratory with international standards which is used by the World Health Organization (WHO) for the registration of all medicines produced in or intended for Africa. Moreover, the national police force has its own forensic laboratories and the National Gendarmerie has the world-class Institute for Criminal Evidence and Criminology.

Awareness of the real threats of terrorism linked to chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) weapons started in the early 1990s. According to intelligence sources, the first attempted attack in Algeria in 1994 was aimed at contaminating the drinking water reservoirs using the botulinum toxin.3 This was followed, thanks to Algerian-British intelligence cooperation, by the dismantling of the terrorist network planning a ricin attack in the London Underground in January 2003,4 and further arrests throughout Europe.5

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2 Interview with PM Hamdani on 7 September 2010
3 Personal communication with MoD CoS Maj. Gen. Lamari on 3 February 2003
Furthermore, several intelligence reports indicate that Al Qaida in the Maghreb has made multiple attempts to manufacture poison, gas, biological agents, and radioactive materials, and that it has training camps specialized in biological and chemical field, particularly in the Sahel area.

The authorities have had to remain alert about CBRN terrorism precisely because Algeria has faced these numerous problems. However, compared to those created in the nuclear field, national controls of sensitive biological and chemical materials are weak, primarily due to the priority given to fighting conventional terrorism. Although there is already a compulsory health quality control provided by specialized national and international agencies regulating the import and export of food products and pharmaceuticals, the building of preventive, scientific, and judicial capacities to fight the threat of chemical and biological proliferation to terrorist networks remains imperfect. With growth of the industry coming only very recently, Algeria has not yet developed comprehensive regulations to prevent possible terrorist acquisition of biological and chemical weapons. This situation is now being addressed by an inter-ministerial committee charged with capacity-building in this area – the committee has been charged with setting laws and regulations for biological agents, particularly concerning regulating the implementation of import, export, holding, purchase, and transport of pathogenic agents and toxins.

The new bio-terrorist threat, described as a third generation threat, is currently addressed by the High National Security Council. Algeria believes that the response must be a coordinated one and consequently mobilizes a wide variety of human and material resources, and involves several departments: the Prime Minister’s Office, National Defense, Interior, Finance, Health, and Foreign Affairs. Authorities have undertaken the protection of water distribution networks by strengthening site security and intruder monitoring, while also setting botulinum toxin detection tests and strengthening the physical protection and security of the pharmaceutical production sites and biological laboratories. Moreover, in late September 2010, Algeria set up a Regional Intelligence Center in Algiers, bringing together the countries of the region to fight against terrorism in all its forms, including CBRN trafficking.

**Conclusion**

From the above commentary it is clear that not only is the WMDFZ in the ME region in the interest of Algeria but through its actions it supports such an idea. Algeria has already signed and ratified the treaty of Pelindaba, establishing a nuclear weapons free Zone on the African continent and since 2009 has participated in the creation of the African Committee on Nuclear Energy compliance and verification mechanism of this treaty. Furthermore, Algeria is compliant with and committed to UNSCR 1540, according to which it is working on domestic legislation governing all aspects of WMD proliferation. Establishing a ME WMDFZ is a principle shared by policymakers and Algeria supports any initiative that would seek to extend such a zone to include the North African region if this were deemed to be useful by all states.

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6 Personal communication with MoD CoS Maj. Gen. Lamari on 7 March 2004
Algeria’s principles are based on the following:

- A non-discriminatory and non-selective approach to the implementation of all relevant treaties governing WMD development and use;
- Security guarantees for states not possessing WMD;
- Prevention of the acquisition or use of CBRN weapons by malevolent actors;
- Confidence building measures and verification with respect to state sovereignty.

Moreover, Algeria has undertaken efforts to raise public awareness on biological and chemical threats and build capacities for response and mitigation in the event of an attack, including exercises involving a multitude of crisis-management stakeholders. Awareness-building on bio-safety and bio-security best practices has even been implemented through university bioscience curriculums. It has also implemented legislation to regulate civil sector biological research involving high-risk agents.

As far as there is a concern about CBRN threats, Algerian policymakers are looking to develop international and regional cooperation on the following points:

- To set up the necessary legislation and regulation to prevent and fight nuclear, biological, and chemical risks and accidents according to standard CBRN defense;
- Intelligence sharing and exchange of experiences in terms of combat CBRN terrorism;
- Crisis management, in response to a potential CBRN terrorist attack;
- To raise awareness of the importance of safety, security, safeguards;
- To set up global CBRN forensic analysis and response capabilities.

Algeria is aware that the MENA region presents a complex political environment for controlling CBRN weapons. However, policymakers trust that a common ground for productive exchange and cooperation exists. It is therefore the case that Algeria supports the regional dialogue potential of the proposed Helsinki Conference, and as a MENA state would willingly participate to fulfil the zone’s promise of regional security and safety.

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