

Self-Determination Conflict Profile

Kabyle Berbers of Algeria

By Abderrahim Foukara

(We offer this analysis as part of FPIF's Self-Determination and Governance project. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the FPIF staff or the boards of either sponsoring organization. Comments are welcome. Please send to Tom Barry <tom@irc-online.org>.)



History

Some eight million of Algeria's 30 million people are Kabyles, descendants of ancient tribes known today as Berbers and presumed to be the original inhabitants of the area bounded by the Libya/Egypt border, the Atlantic Ocean, the Sahara desert, and the Mediterranean Sea. Present-day Kabylia lies to the north of Algeria's capital, Algiers. The people of this mountainous region maintain a distinct culture despite invasions by the Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans, and French.

Fourteen centuries of coexistence with Arabic culture has been replaced by a growing demand for linguistic and cultural recognition. This, in turn, has become intertwined with opposition to authoritarian rule.

The process of Arabizing Algerian society has intensified since independence from France in 1962 and the Kabyles have felt increasingly vulnerable. Nationalists and Islamists have opposed demands that the Kabyle language, which is unwritten, be taught alongside Arabic in Algeria's schools. Over time, the Berber issue has come to be regarded as a challenge to national unity.

Many Kabyles, who fought alongside their neighbors against French rule, hoped that independence would bring constitutional recognition of their culture. But the wounds of colonialism were still raw and pan-Arabist ideology swept the region.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the early 1990s also forced the state to assert an increasingly Arabic identity, outlawing the issuance of official documents in any language other than Arabic. The law essentially targeted French but the Kabyles interpreted it as a gesture to appease the Islamists at their expense.

In April 2001, the Kabyles began a series of protests sparked initially by the death in police custody of a Berber youth. The protests became violent and drew

Foreign Policy In Focus

Self-Determination

Regional Overview

Foreign Policy in Focus is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). The project depends on sales and subscription income, individual donors, and grants from foundations and churches. In Focus internships are available, and we invite article queries and comments.

Essay Editor

John Gershman (IRC)

Project Directors

Tom Barry (IRC)
Martha Honey (IPS)

Communications & Outreach

Kathy Spillman (IPS)
kathy@ips-dc.org
Erik Leaver (IPS)
erik@fpif.org

Project Administrative Assistant

Nancy Stockdale (IRC)

Design/Production Manager

Tonya Cannariato (IRC)

Editorial inquiries and information:

IRC Editor

Voice: (505) 388-0208

Fax: (505) 388-0619

Email: tom@irc-online.org

IPS Editor

Voice: (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232

Fax: (202) 387-7915

Email: ipsps@igc.apc.org

Orders and subscription information:

Mail: PO Box 4506

Albuquerque, NM 87196-4506

Voice: (505) 842-8288

Fax: (505) 246-1601

Email: infocus@irc-online.org

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF) aims to help forge a new global affairs agenda for the U.S. government and the U.S. public—an agenda that makes the U.S. a more responsible global leader and partner. The project responds to current foreign policy issues and crises with FPIF policy briefs, the *Progressive Response* ezine, and news briefings. In addition, FPIF publishes a series of special reports, a media guide of foreign policy analysts, and a biennial book on U.S. foreign policy.

FPIF's network of advocates, organizations, activists, and scholars functions as a "think tank without walls," reaching out to constituencies and foreign policy actors to ensure that U.S. foreign policy represents a more broadly conceived understanding of U.S. national interests.

<http://www.fpif.org/>

international attention. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika promised an investigation into the young Kabyle's death but Kabyles rejected the ensuing report as incomplete and biased.

Main Actors

Government: President Bouteflika and Prime Minister Ali Benflis acknowledge Berber culture is an integral part of Algerian identity but insist all Algerians have a say in whether Kabyle should be made an official language.

Parliament:

RDN (Rassemblement national démocratique): The governing party, created in 1997, led by former Prime Minister and current Justice Minister Ahmed Ouyahya.

FLN (Le Front national de libération): Led independence struggle in the 1950s, ruled until 1988, when multi-party system was created. Kabyles resent it for denying them their cultural rights in the name of Arabism and unity.

Army:

The real policymakers behind the scenes. Generals include Khaled Nezzar, Larbi Belkheir, Mohamed Lamari, Smain Lamari, and Mohamed Mediene, also known as Toufik. Orchestrated annulment of 1992 elections, which Islamists were poised to win. Many officers are of Berber origin but regard Kabyles as threatening the status quo.

Kabyle population:

Opposition Socialist Forces Front (Front des Forces Socialistes, FFS): Large Berber base. Led by Hocine Ait Ahmed, prominent in the independence struggle.

Rally For Culture and Democracy (Rassemblement pour la culture et la démocratie, RCD): Recent Berber-based party led by the staunchly anti-

Islamist Said Saadi. Was in governing coalition until August 2001, withdrew in disagreement over official inquiry into Kabylia violence.

Citizens Movement: Emergent grassroots network organizes demonstrations and coordinates between various provinces of Kabylia. Committee has sometimes negotiated directly with the government, bypassing the RCD and FFS, which it regards as too close to the state structure.

Proposed Solutions and Evaluation of Prospects

President Bouteflika has pledged a popular referendum on the Kabyle language, but it appears unlikely the issue will be put to the people any time soon. A referendum could be risky from the Kabyles' point of view: Many Algerians do not think the Kabyle language should have national status and were the idea defeated in a vote, this would give opponents more reason to bury the whole issue.

It would be wrong to assume the tension is between a Berber region and an Arab central government. Many Kabyles wield considerable intellectual, economic, and political influence in Algiers and in the army. The law proclaiming Arabic the sole official language was passed under former President Liamine Zeroual, a first generation Berber-speaker whose government was under pressure from nationalists and Islamists.

The challenge facing the Kabyles is not simply how to gain official recognition for their language. They also have to convince the establishment they are not intent on reversing values and fortunes built on pan-Arabism. The establishment may not be easily convinced, particularly as there are extremists among the Kabyles who maintain that Algeria is fundamentally Berber.

U.S. Role

U.S. oil and gas corporations want to increase their presence and the Pentagon wants closer military and intelligence cooperation with Algeria, a

regional ally working to suppress Islamist militants. Washington is unlikely to single out the Kabyle issue for specific discussion. However, recent U.S. administrations have called for greater democracy in Algeria. Many

Kabyles see this as an opportunity to press their demands.

(Abderrahim Foukara <afoukara@allafrica.com> is a journalist with the British Broadcasting Corporation.)

Sources for More Information

Allafrica.com

<http://www.allafrica.com/>

Le Monde diplomatique (English edition)

<http://www.en.monde-diplomatique.fr/2001/07/01leader>

<http://www.en.monde-diplomatique.fr/2001/07/05algeria>

Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)

The Kabyle Riots

<http://www.merip.org/pins/pin56.html>

World Amazigh Action Coalition

<http://www.waac.org/amazigh/2001-Kabylia/index.html>

Socialist Forces Front

<http://www.medeab.be/en/index056.htm>



Self-Determination In Focus, a Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF) project, aims to provide comprehensive analysis of self-determination issues around the world. As a “think tank without walls,” FPIF brings together an international network of analysts and activists dedicated to “making the U.S. a more responsible global leader and partner.” We encourage your involvement in the self-determination project. Send suggestions for policy briefs, updates of self-determination struggles, bibliographic additions, new web links, and commentary and criticism to <infocus@irc-online.org>.

Visit our site at <http://www.fpif.org/selfdetermination/index.html>