

Algeria Amidst North Africa's Transformation January 13, 2012

Algeria responded actively to popular demands for political openness in the last year, and these reforms will come into full effect in 2012, according to H.E. Mourad Medelci, the Algerian minister of foreign affairs. Medelci spoke to a group of about 50 at CSIS on January 13, 2012.

Medelci described an array of Algerian government responses to unrest last spring in Algeria and neighboring states. In February 2011, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika lifted a state of emergency law that had existed since 1992 and promised additional constitutional amendments that would limit presidential terms and loosen restrictions on the press.

Medelci added that President Bouteflika reallocated the budget in order to increase public sector wages and cushion the population from high food prices. Taking a lesson from Tunisia, local governments in Algeria eased restrictions on street vendors operating without permits and postponed tax collection on storeowners claiming to be hindered by illegal commerce.

Medelci emphasized that development policies aimed at attracting investment, diversifying the economy, and educating a robust workforce will promote broader economic progress in the country. He was optimistic that cooperation with the U.S. and Europe on pharmaceutical innovation and clean energy technology—in addition to traditional energy sectors—will continue. Likewise, he suggested that Algeria's unusually high import rates in the last year indicate growth in infrastructural development.

As an extension of these socioeconomic policies, Medelci reaffirmed the government's commitment to implement new laws and then convene a constitutional reform committee. Among the laws will be a quota mandating a minimum of 20 percent female representation in all local and national electoral bodies. After many years of state influence, private radio and television companies will also now be allowed to operate alongside official channels. Judges will be tasked with a larger role in administering elections, and civil society organizations will be granted greater freedoms. Medelci suggested that these laws have the potential to open Algeria's political discourse.

Some participants in the meeting expressed concern for the potential aftermath of the May 2012 elections, especially if Islamists perform as well as they have in neighboring states. The ruling FLN's reaction to Islamists' electoral victory in 1991—violent repression that led to more than 100,000 deaths—makes many fear that the government would react similarly today. Medelci expressed confidence that no such repetition would occur. Islamists are already represented in the parliament and the government, he said, so while the elections might alter proportions of Islamic representation, the government will not see the Islamists' victory as a threat to domestic stability or cohesion. Moreover, Medelci said that Algeria has a “republican army” that will honor the results of free and fair elections. However, he cautioned that laws do

bar the election of “participants in Algeria’s national tragedy” -- a reference to Islamist actors in the civil war.

Whatever the outcome of elections, Medelci said Algeria expects its neighbors to follow the Algerian lead of not interfering in their internal affairs. For the duration of the unrest in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, Algiers stayed neutral, only reaching out to transitional governments once a basic settlement had been reached. The foreign minister supported a similar approach to Syria, noting that mediation through the Arab League serves as an alternative to external tampering. While he took issue with the recent statement of an Algerian participant in the Arab League delegation that the monitoring mission in Syria is a “farce,” he conceded that the League charter must be reformed so that it represents states and peoples, not regimes.

Medelci stressed that opportunities for engagement with neighboring Morocco are abundant. Counterterrorism is one obvious area of mutual concern, despite the fact that terrorist activities in each country have created tensions between them at times. Modernizing water use and irrigation systems (which are vital for the agricultural sectors in both countries), and promoting educational exchanges also feature on the bilateral agenda. Medelci hopes further integration with Morocco can be used as a vehicle to advance cooperation across the Maghreb.

Another important source of external cooperation, Medelci suggested, could be further engagement with the United States. Medelci noted that the United States is already making substantial contributions to Algeria’s oil sector, particularly in creating the infrastructure needed to expand reserves. While Medelci expects this role to continue, he also identified alternative energy as a growth industry for Algeria and an area of potential partnership with the United States. Although Algeria will remain a major producer of oil and gas, Algeria hopes solar power will provide 40 percent of its electricity by 2030. To do so will require extensive international cooperation.