



2 Bd. ABBANE RAMDANE

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*General background  
information on Algeria  
esp. political stability &  
economic development*

Dear Friends:

A number of people have asked for more general information about Algeria, and it is an unfortunate fact that most Americans know relatively little about this country; so let us see if we can help. First of all, Algeria should not be confused with Nigeria or Liberia (both in West Africa); and the name of the country (Algeria) should not be confused with the name of the capital city (Algiers). Algeria borders on the Mediterranean just across from Spain and France and shares North Africa with Morocco on the west and Tunisia and Libya on the east. Niger, Mali and Mauritania border it on the south and southwest.

This is a fairly large country, but most of it is in the Sahara desert; so most of its seemingly small population is rather crowded in a narrow strip of mountains, valleys and plains paralleling the northern coast line. Algeria is only slightly larger in land area and a bit smaller in population than all the following states combined: Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Colorado and Wyoming. The Mediterranean coast is at about the same latitude as Nashville, Tennessee, or central California. Central and southern California provide the nearest U.S. equivalent to the climate here, including changes between the coast and the interior, with both mountains and desert.

In a world of great political instability, Algeria now has an enviable record. That record stands out against a background of many difficulties. This nation experienced an agonizing birth, coming through 7½ years of war against the French army (1954-62). An extremely troubled infancy followed her birth as the mass exodus of nearly 1 million French suddenly left about 9 million Algerians with only fragmented pieces of a skeletal force of trained and experienced people to run the administrative affairs, social services and economic machinery of the country. At the same time, the National Liberation Front was experiencing the inevitable problems of internal struggles. A self-disciplined unity based primarily on the need to fight the common colonial enemy could not possibly be maintained once independence had been achieved and crucial decisions had to be made concerning the new nation's future. In 1965, at the age of 3, Algeria had a nearly bloodless coup that set up a new revolutionary council under a then little-known figure named Houari Boumediene. This new leader and president of the revolutionary council was to become a symbol of Algerian development and stability, a well-known figure on the international scene and a person of considerable influence in the third world.

We referred to the president's death near the end of our last letter. It was only 2 years earlier (1976) that he had led the nation through debates and then referendum on a national charter and a new constitution. A reorganization of the one political party was in the works for 1979. In spite of his great importance in the life of the country over the previous 13½ years, the transition was amazingly smooth, including a quick organization of the party congress, a few changes in the party structure, some slight modifications in the constitution, selecting a new leader as head of the party and president of the country, confirming the new president by a nation-wide vote and setting up a new government. When one thinks of the great instability in so many areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America, that is a pretty enviable record.

The economic and social progress in the life of the Algerian people has likewise been most striking. From the very beginning, the leaders have bargained hard to retain Algerian control of the oil and gas that is the foundation of the economy. In spite of all the problems and much trial and error, the lot of the average Algerian has improved immensely. While life still is hard and primitive for the rural masses and there is still plenty of poverty in the poorer sections of the cities, this can scarcely be compared with the massive, crushing misery that prevailed before independence. Moreover, a new and vital element of dignity has been added even for the struggling peasant member of a rural cooperative. At least he is no longer the virtual serf of a foreign land-owner.

Immense efforts have been made to offer a better life to the people. Well over 25% of the national budget has been devoted to education every year. Whereas only a tiny majority of Algerians were educated along with the French before independence, over 70% of the children are now in school. At the university level, 70,000 students signed up last fall in the four Algerian universities and six beginning university centers. In 1962 there was only one university in the capital with



minimal enrollment. Other efforts include the extension of medical care to the masses, subsidizing the importation of large quantities of basic food items, upgrading the bus and train transportation systems, creating an independent and rapidly growing air line as well as a merchant marine and passenger-boat service, and developing a number of industries. One should remember that France had allowed almost no industrial development here, maintaining Algeria as a source of raw materials and as a market for French industry.

All this progress has not been without problems, of course. Massive education and health care have had to sacrifice quality <sup>for</sup> quantity, factories are sometimes built before enough raw materials and trained personnel are available to make them productive, the late president complained more and more about bureaucratic inefficiency, and improvements in the agricultural sector are still lagging behind in spite of increasing attention to that phase of national development. In addition, western inflation, imported with food and with pharmaceutical and industrial products, increases faster than oil price hikes. *NOTE: The fall in oil prices has undermined continuing efforts at development & left the govt. with heavy debts.*

There is one particular problem which underlies and intensifies most of the others. It is the population explosion. The net growth rate of 3.2% per year ranks among the very top in the world and with its compound effect has approximately doubled the population since 1960. The last census (late 1977) gave the following results: a total population of 18,250,000 of whom 54% are 17 years of age or under and 22% are five years of age or under. Such statistics make the accomplishments appear even more amazing but also reveal the herculean nature of the challenge still ahead in such areas as education, employment, food production, housing, and water supplies. The housing situation was highlighted in an article in the official press noting that the population growth, coupled with migration to the cities and new demands for individual apartments for newly-weds no longer content to live with the groom's parents in the old social pattern, will create demands calling for the doubling of the number of housing units by the turn of the century. Another article in the official press cites a government authority as saying the present water supply for drinking and industrial purposes is 40% short of the full demand. To meet the growing demand by the end of the century and to increase the irrigated land more than five-fold as well, some 40 more large dams will be needed to supply six billion more cubic meters of water per year. *NOTE: Great efforts continue in regard to housing & water supply.*

So far only the most discreet efforts have been made to encourage family planning. The idea of spacing out and limiting the number of children is totally foreign to the old traditional values of society here and would seem self-defeating in the context of the old traditional economic realities, where a large progeny was considered essential for economic production and for social security. Nevertheless, both among the more educated people and among the women coming to the free pre-natal and well-baby clinics, a growing desire to plan and limit the size of families is clearly discernible. This trend is further encouraged by other continuing changes in the basic social structures--the social security system inherited from the French (but from which only a minority of Algerians could benefit) has been radically extended, more and more youth are getting more and more education and wanting a different style of life, increasing numbers of girls and young women are being employed outside the home. How much influence all these factors will have in decreasing the rate of population growth--and how quickly--is an unknown that will surely have considerable impact on the nation's future in one way or another. *NOTE: Since 1980-81 great efforts have been continuing to encourage family planning.*

As commercial relations and technological cooperation with France continue to diminish and as economic links with the U.S. and Great Britain increase, English becomes ever more important as the second European language here. Teaching English at the university and helping prepare better English teachers for tomorrow is one small way we can participate in the country's struggle for a better future. Helping a few other foreigners here adjust to a different kind of life and see the positive side of things instead of merely complaining about the problems and helping them be faithful to their highest standards of professional conscience in spite of difficult adjustments is another way of trying to be useful. We also have many opportunities in this multi-cultural setting to witness to the brotherhood of man as a gift of the one God, Maker of heaven and earth, and as a calling to be fulfilled in our daily lives, humbly acknowledging that we are all creatures of that one God and neighbors in the one world community He has entrusted to our care. May we invite you to participate in this same witness through a deepening awareness of realities in the third world and prayerful concern for the people whose daily lives are caught up in those realities.

Your neighbors, brothers, and sister,

THE BUTLERS  
David, Carol and Sons