

Commentary, May 30, 2016

## ITALY AND ALGERIA, A STABLE PARTNERSHIP IN A TROUBLED REGION

ARMANDO SANGUINI

**I**t is well known that the oil and gas sector is the backbone of the Algerian economy, accounting for about 35 per cent of gross domestic product, and two-thirds of total exports; that the first commercial oil discovery was in 1956 and that production started in 1958 during the bloodiest anti-colonial revolt of national liberation in Arab history. And that Italy was at that time – and still is - in great need of this resource for its own development.

Less known is that during that period Enrico Mattei, the founder of Eni and flag-bearer of the revolutionary new “75-25% formula”, publicly declared that he would never ask for gas/oil concessions from Algeria until independence was gained and offered the Algerian Provisional Government crucial advice on how to handle the energy sector in view of and during the Evian negotiations. And even less known is that such a strategic approach reflected the feelings of broad sections of Italian civil society and of most of its political spectrum, quite close to the Algerian forces struggling to break their colonial chains. Which made all the more creditable the coherence of the Italian govern-

ment in avoiding any formal act that could be interpreted as an attempt to interfere in France’s domestic affairs and/or hurt its European obligations and Atlantic solidarity.

Algerian independence, sincerely welcomed by the Italian government, was the starting point of a never-ending and ever-growing period of constructive and fruitful relations ranging from energy (the pillar of our mutual, basic, national interest) to security, to all material and immaterial sectors stemming from the complementarity of the two socio-economic systems. With the emerging but clear perspective, at least from the Italian point of view, of a Mediterranean horizon where the two sides could find a common future, which started to be practicably feasible only years ahead. A perspective that found a very tangible and symbolic representation at the same time in what was called the Transmed or, better, “Mattei gas pipeline” – built from 1978 to 1983 - connecting Algeria to Italy, through Tunisia.

Energy supply and demand dynamics have been the

powerful driving force in promoting the progressive enlargement of the partnership we have experienced, but such a result would have been far less impressive if not fertilized by a strong feeling of friendship and at the same time of deep respect for Algeria's political sovereignty: two states, two peoples, two partners on an equal basis.

An approach that was always greatly appreciated, in particular when Algeria entered the most difficult period of its history; when it was ravaged by the bloody civil war ignited by the 1992 military coup d'état staged to hinder an otherwise unavoidable victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (F.I.S.). A great mistake, set to pave the way to severe, far-reaching pernicious consequences, especially in terms of a conflict-ridden climate, instability, and in the end a breeding ground for endemic roots of terrorism.

The tremendous wave of terror that had befallen Algeria, always crossing new thresholds of atrocity, also severely hit Italian companies, imposing exceptional safety measures and drastic reductions of our industrial presence. In putting our bilateral ties to a hard test, it proved and energized their strength in terms of solidarity and fellowship and security cooperation.

Bouteflika himself publicly expressed his sincere gratitude and appreciation for the high level of understanding and friendship shown by the Italian course of action during that embattled decade.

He also underlined several times how effective the Italian contribution had been to the launching of the Barcelona Process and the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Italy had to accept his being less inclined to regionalism than to bilateralism even if he has always been well aware of Italy's commitment to encouraging the growth of the Arab Maghreb Union as a crucial regional component of

such a partnership.

Bouteflika was the man of national reconciliation, the champion of Algerian stability, security and cohesion, the president capable of promoting the development of his country and at the same time of building up a system of power in which to bring together the main political, military and security forces of the country. And a challenging package of development measures: gas and oil being the gigantic, vital engine available for the purpose.

Italy was the perfect partner: for its energy needs, the highest in Europe, for its longstanding, close and good bilateral relations with Algeria, for the political quality of the partnership between the two countries, for its Euro-Mediterranean commitment and finally for the role it recognized Algeria within the African Union, inclusive of an important peace and security policy.

It was only a matter of time before the two countries resolved to sign a pact of friendship, cooperation and good neighbourliness (2003), a real and significant turning point in their country to country relations as confirmed by the long series of agreements signed in the following years, covering all sectors of bilateral interest, with energy, trade, security, migration, culture the most important; by the hundreds of visits at government levels paid by both sides and the great array of Italian companies working there.

Important to note is that this process was not stopped by the 2011 domino effect of the so called "Arab Spring", more as a consequence of a general climate of political fatigue than of the measures, timely and in any case effective, adopted by the government. On the contrary, if anything, the disruptive repercussions produced in the region, and particularly in Libya, reinforced the already existing Italian determination to further that process because of its strategic value, in

and of itself, and as part and parcel of its wider strategy aimed at keeping alive the perspective of a Euro-Mediterranean partnership worthy of the name.

The consistency and coherence of that determination is clearly reflected in the dynamics of recent years; particularly between 2012 and 2015 when Prime Minister Monti first and Prime Minister Renzi afterwards, put significant emphasis on two focal points:

- -the Mediterranean as “the heart of relations between Europe and Africa and between Africa and Italy”;
- -the strategic partnership between Algeria and Italy within the framework of those relations, where stability, co-development, counter-terrorism policies, management of migration flows are key issues. Along with the absolute priority of energy which is expected to receive another structural boost when the new gas pipeline GALSI – a project of Community interest within the European Energy Plan for Recovery (EEPR) – will be operational (2018) and beneficial to both Italy and Algeria but also to Europe.

Italy is fully committed to working along these lines, at the bilateral and regional levels, with even greater conviction in being well aware of the political uncertainties hanging on Algeria’s future.