

One Hundred Days in Algeria *By Rick Savone*

A lot can happen in a hundred days. Before leaving for Algeria, I was convinced that I was being posted to a third-world country with which Canada only trades wheat for oil. I was certain that the security problems in Algiers and the persistent terrorism would keep me up at night and eventually be the end of me. I was apprehensive about managing the political portfolio, especially as a newcomer to the trade stream. As a result, I left Ottawa with my mind made up about Algeria. Then came one hundred days that included a conciliatory national dialogue process, preparations for a democratic referendum to re-vamp the constitution and dozens of new business opportunities and trade awakenings. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, I have changed my mind.

Many eyes are watching the development of the political situation in Algeria. Policy-makers and decision-shapers are waiting to be sure that Algeria has finally emerged from the ugliness and instability of the last decade. While the political situation is showing modest signs of success with the slow introduction of democracy, the economic situation is more promising. After first flinching in reaction to the terrorism and political upheaval of the last decade, Algeria's Canadian partners are today increasingly aware of the trade opportunities that they can share with the North African country. They are coming back in force.

Canadian companies are determined to reinvigorate their trade links with Algeria because they know that the rising sun on the economic front is a harbinger for much-awaited and long overdue political reconciliation. From agricultural products to oil exploration and engineering services to infrastructure construction, Canadian trade with Algeria is diversifying and growing consistently. That growth is the result of the confidence Canadian companies have in the changing Algerian economy: growing slowly, but still growing. Our Canadian clients are increasingly satisfied that Algerians are getting their political house in order. As a result, Algeria continues to be by far Canada's most important trading partner in all of Africa and the Middle East.

The relationship between the political situation and opportunities for trade should not be overlooked by officers in our Department. In posts like Algeria, trade commissioners can play an important role in political analysis. Trade facilitation and promotion includes providing Canadian clients with the necessary political

information that helps them to plan their strategy appropriately. Trade has always been the cornerstone of the Algerian-Canadian friendship and our healthy trade will continue to thrive with the protection and nourishment of a healthy political situation. If taking advantage of the trade-political nexus is what the Department has in mind when it reorganizes, then I applaud the effort.

As a trade commissioner, I expected to facilitate and promote trade directly on my first posting. In Algiers, where I handle the political portfolio, I experienced some difficulty in "getting it right" when it came to the subtleties of political analysis and reporting. I will not say that I am spectacularly adept at handling the political portfolio, but I do appreciate the significance of trade for the Algerian-Canadian friendship. I know who the client is and I know what services and insight I can provide for my clientele.

Now, after one hundred days in my first posting, I think back to something my father said to me just before leaving for Algiers. He could see that I was concerned about heading out for the first time, that I was worried about my personal security and he could tell that the upcoming career challenges were weighing heavily on my mind. He quoted to me something that Winston Churchill had said during World War II, "This isn't the end," he said, "This isn't even the beginning of the end. This is just the end of the beginning." As a new trade commissioner in the Department, intoxicated by the work of a political officer, I am convinced that my father is right: What a beginning it has been!

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