Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's Refworld website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the Knowledge and Information Management Unit.

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Algeria: information on the Mouvement pour l’autonomie de la Kabylie (MAK), including its activities and the treatment of MAK members at the hands of the authorities and Islamists; treatment of Berbers by the authorities and Islamists (2009 - March 2013)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

Sources have indicated that the Mouvement pour l’autonomie de la Kabylie (MAK) has been in existence since 2001 (Le Figaro 21 Apr. 2010; Maroc Hebdo Apr. 2010; The Middle East Quarterly Spring 2010, 96). During a telephone conversation with the Research Directorate, the Director of Algeria's Centre d'études maghrébines, an Oran-based organization founded by the American Institute for Maghrib Studies - AIMS) to support scientific research on Algeria (AIMS n.d.), maintained that MAK is a "relatively minor" Algerian organization that is demanding autonomy, and even secession, from Kabylie (Director, Feb. 25, 2013).

According to the Minority Rights Group International (MRG), MAK wants Algeria to become a secular state and has expressed fears that the Algerian government might become "too" close to the Islamists (ibid.). According to an article in the Middle East Quarterly, "Kabyle activists describe Islamism as a totalitarian movement" (Spring 2010, 96).

In addition, sources are also describing MAK as a Berber group (PHW 2012, 30; MRG May 2008).

Sources are indicating that Ferhat Mehenni is the founder (Director, Feb. 25, 2013) or co-founder of MAK (Middle East Quarterly Spring 2010, 96). He was also the movement's leader (PHW 2012, 30; Le Figaro 21 Apr. 2010; Middle East Quarterly Spring 2010, 96). However, articles in the Algerian media published in March 2013 paint Bouaziz Ait Chebib as president of MAK (Algérie Express March 10, 2013; Le Matin March 10, 2013).

The Director of the Centre d'études maghrébines en Algérie stressed that MAK is not officially recognized in Algeria (Director, Feb. 25, 2013). According to the Director, MAK is active within France's Algerian community (ibid.).

According to the Director, MAK grew out of a split with the Mouvement culturel berbère - also founded, apparently, by Ferhat Mehenni (ibid.). The Director claims that MAK is not taken seriously by most of the Algerian population and that it has little support from Berbers in Kabylie (ibid.). Among the sources it consulted, the Research Directorate failed to turn up any information pointing in the same direction.

2. MAK activities
MAK reportedly called for a boycott of the presidential elections held in 2009 (Kabylie News, Jan. 1, 2009; PHW 2012, 30).

According to two sources consulted by the Research Directorate, in the Spring of 2010, MAK organized demonstrations in support of Kabyle autonomy (ibid., 31; Le Figaro 21 Apr. 2010).

Three sources note that MAK formed a government in exile (Director, Feb. 25, 2013; PHW 2012, 31; Le Figaro 21 Apr. 2010). It seems this government was formed in France in 2010 (ibid.; PHW 2012, 31; AFP June 3, 2010), with Ferhat Mehenni as president (ibid.). Le Figaro reports that according to Ferhat Mehenni, the mission of this provisional government, or Gouvernement provisoire kabyle (GPK), is to (translation) "put in place Kabylie's official institutions and to represent Kabylie before the international community" (21 Apr. 2010).

According to the Agence France-Presse (AFP), the Algerian prime minister branded the announcement of the provisional government's formation (translation) as "just so much noise," and this announcement was apparently ignored by most Algerian newspapers (June 3, 2010). According to the Algerian daily La Tribune, the creation of the provisional government was (translation) "condemned" by Kabylie's two leading parties, the Front des forces socialistes (FSS) and the Rassemblement pour la culture et la démocratie (RCD) (June 10, 2010). Furthermore, Le Figaro reported in April 2010 that the GPK (translation) "is far from enjoying unanimous support in Kabylie, even in pro-autonomy circles" (21 Apr. 2010). The GPK has a website, www.kabylie-gouv.org, where one can, among other things, apply for a Kabyle identity card (GPK March 12, 2012).

According to the Tribune, in April 2012, hundreds of autonomy supporters took part in an MAK-led demonstration in the city of Tizi Ouzou to commemorate the anniversary of the "Amazigh Spring" (La Tribune 22 Apr. 2012). The Tribune also reported that the demonstration ended (translation) "peacefully" (ibid.). Another march is reported to have taken place in April 2013, again in Tizi Ouzou, to commemorate the same anniversary (Algérie 1 20 Apr. 2013). According to the Nouvelles Algérie 1 site, following the demonstration, (translation) "the crowd dispersed peacefully" (ibid.).

MAK is also reported to have called for a boycott of the legislative elections that were to be held in May 2012 (La Tribune 22 Apr. 2012).

3. Treatment of MAK Members at the Hands of Authorities and Islamists

3.1. Treatment of MAK Members by Authorities

Le Figaro reports that Mehenni has been in exile in France since 2009, following a warrant issued for his arrest (June 3, 2010). The Director of the Centre d'études maghrébines en Algérie quoted a Mehenni spokesperson as having said that Mehenni was stripped of his Algerian citizenship (Director, Feb. 25, 2013).

A report prepared by the Congrès mondial amazigh (CMA), a Berber association, for the Examen périodique universel de l'Algérie by the UN Human Rights Council tells the story of 17 people with MAK ties who were arrested during five incidents between September and November 2011 (CMA Nov. 2011, para. 12). Those arrested include militants, members, a national secretary, a member of the national council and the secretary general of MAK (ibid.). The CMA report does not spell out the reasons given for each of the arrests, but describes them as harassment or attempts at preventing MAK from carrying out activities (ibid.). Among the sources it consulted within time constraints, the Research Directorate could not find other information on these arrests.

In March 2013, the authorities blocked MAK from holding a rally in Tizi Ouzou (Algérie Express 10 March 2013; Le Matin 10 March 2013). Demonstrators, including MAK president Bouaziz Ait Chebib, were reportedly arrested (ibid.; Algérie Express 10 March 2013). The Algerian daily Le Matin reports that apart from Bouaziz Ait Chebib, all the other demonstrators who had been arrested were released the same day (10 March 2013).

3.2. Treatment of MAK Members by Islamists

Sources indicate that the MAK president received death threats from Islamists (Middle East Quarterly Spring 2010, 96; The Weekly Standard 16 June 2003).

Among the sources it consulted, the Research Directorate did not find any other information on the treatment of MAK members at the hands of Islamists.

4. Treatment of Berbers by Authorities and Islamists

4.1 Situation of Berbers in Algeria
According to Freedom House, the Berbers [also called Amazighs (CMA Nov. 2011, intro.]) comprise the largest ethnic group in Algeria (Freedom House 2011).

Sources note that the Kabyle constitute just one of Algeria's Berber groups (Director, Feb. 25, 2013; Jeune Afrique Nov. 25, 2009). Jeune Afrique, a weekly reporting African news, explains: (translation)

The Berber language, Tamazight, has at least six variations in Algeria, and fragments the Berber entity into six offshoots: the Kabyle, Chaouis, Touaregs, Mozabites, Zénètes (black Berbers) and Chenouis. (Jeune Afrique 25 Nov. 2009)

According to AFP, Berberophones, who include residents of the Aurès and Mzab region in addition to residents of Kabylie, account for 25 to 30 percent of the Algerian population (June 3, 2010). L'aménagement linguistique dans le monde, a Université Laval website outlining the linguistic situation and policies in 195 countries (L'aménagement linguistique n.d.), indicates that the Berbers make up about a third of Algeria's population (ibid. May 3, 2010). For its part, the MRG claims that about a quarter of the Algerian population consider themselves Berber (2011, 212).

According to Freedom House, the Berber language Tamazigh [also written as Amazigh] is spoken by some 14% of the Algerian population (Freedom House 2011). Certain sources indicate that Tamazight was officially recognized as a national language in 2002 (MRG 2011, 212; L'aménagement linguistique, May 3, 2010; AFP June 3, 2010). L'aménagement linguistique dans le monde states that with its recognition as a national language, (translation) "the Algerian State can no longer, at least not openly, combat Tamazight" (May 3, 2010). L'aménagement linguistique dans le monde explains, however, that in recognizing Tamazight as a (translation) "national language" but not an "official language," the State is committed to "promoting" Tamazight, "but not to using it (contrary to Arabic)" (May 3, 2010). But Berber activists want Tamazight recognized as one of Algeria's official languages, like Arabic (Algérie 1 20 Apr. 2013; Jeune Afrique 25 Nov. 2009).

4.2 Treatment of Berbers by Authorities

According to MRG, relations between the State and Berbers have been marked at times by violent demonstrations (MRG 2011, 212). According to MRG, most of the Berbers are not in favour of seceding, but instead want greater recognition of the Berber identity and of their rights within the Algerian state (MRG May 2008). According to MRG, "the most enduring form of Berber opposition [to the Arabization of Algeria] has come from [...] cultural movements" (ibid.).

In its report to the UN Human Rights Council, the CMA maintains that those active in efforts to promote the Berber identity (translation) are subjected to administrative, legal and police harassment, threats and occasional kidnappings followed by serious physical assault perpetrated by "unknown" individuals. Investigations, when they are ordered, are carried out under police control; consequently, they never uncover the truth. (CMA Nov. 2011, para. 9)

The CMA adds that the climate of terror created by State security forces, particularly in Kabylie, and fear of reprisals, make citizens very unlikely to file complaints or make public the violence directed against them. (ibid., para. 14)

According to the CMA, creation of Berber associations is subject to certain restrictions, and these associations' activities are sometimes (translation) "arbitrarily banned" (ibid., para. 9). Among the sources it consulted, the Research Directorate did not find any other information pointing in the same direction as that provided by the CMA.

The Director of the Centre d'études maghrébines en Algérie notes that Berbers occupy or have occupied major posts within the government (Director, Feb. 25, 2013). Such individuals are said to include the former prime minister (ibid.; Jeune Afrique 25 Nov. 2009), the prime minister who began serving in February 2013 (Director 25 Feb. 2013), the chief of military intelligence services (Director, Feb. 25, 2013; Jeune Afrique 25 Nov. 2009) and several high-placed generals (Director, Feb. 25, 2013). According to the CMA, however, Berbers who (translation) "demand the right to have their identity respected" have difficulty finding a job or getting promoted within the public administration (Nov. 2011, para. 9).

Freedom House notes that in recent years, the authorities have made efforts to respond to Berbers' cultural demands, in particular by promoting Tamazigh (2012). According to Jeune Afrique, a Tamazigh television network was set up, and signage for a few administrative services is in Tamazight (25 Nov. 2009). Freedom House states that an academy and commissioner's office for the promotion of Tamazigh were created in 2007 (2011). However, the CMA maintains that State recognition of Tamazigh and the creation of a Higher Council for this language (translation) "are nothing more than lip service" that has failed to deliver "any concrete change toward respect [...] for Berbers' cultural and language rights" (Nov. 2011, para. 8).
Two sources consulted by the Research Directorate claim that despite the measures taken by the State, Tamazigh is rarely - if ever - taught in schools (Freedom House 2011; MRG 2011). The CMA maintains that Tamazigh, which was taught in 16 wilayas (departments) in 1995, was taught in only six 6 wilayas in 2011 (Nov. 2011, para. 33). Jeune Afrique describes the teaching of Tamazight as a (translation) "failure" due to a lack of resources and the lack of a "true" Tamazight academy (25 Nov. 2009). According to L'aménagement linguistique dans le monde, Arabic maintains (translation) "its predominant status" in the country, being the lone language used in Parliament, the courts system and the public administration, adding that "only documents in Arabic are recognized as official" (3 May 2010). Similarly, Freedom House maintains that Tamazigh is rarely if ever used in services to the public or the judiciary (2011).

4.2.1 Arrests and Incidents of Violence

In August 2009, nine CMA members were reportedly arrested in Tizi Ouzou and then released after several hours of questioning (CMA Nov. 2011, para. 12).

In January 2010, Berbers activists in Kabylie reportedly commemorated the 30th anniversary of the 1980 Berber Spring, during which students demonstrated for greater cultural and language rights (MRG 2011, 212). As part of the commemoration of this anniversary, a demonstration demanding respect for Berber rights was organized in the city of Ain Benian (ibid.; Human Rights Watch, May 3, 2010), in April 2010 (ibid.). Human Rights Watch states that during the demonstration, authorities responded with "repression" (ibid.), while the MRG maintains that the police used force (2011, 212). Some of the demonstrators were arrested [about thirty, according to the MRG (2011, 212)] (ibid.; Human Rights Watch, May 3, 2010). According to the MRG, those arrested were questioned and detained several hours (MRG 2011, 212). Apparently the organizers officially requested authorization to hold the demonstration, but the authorities did not respond to their request (ibid.).

According to the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, on May 26, 2010, the police used "excessive force" during a "peaceful" demonstration in Tizi Ouzou; the march had been organized to commemorate the events of the "Black Spring," triggered by the death of a young Kabyle in April 2001 while detained in a police station (Observatory 2011, 33). According to the Observatory, a dozen people were injured (ibid.). Among the sources it consulted, the Research Directorate did not find any other information on the demonstration in Tizi Ouzou.

In July 2010, police officials are reported to have prohibited organizers, including the CMA, from holding a human rights seminar in Tizi-Wezzu, Kabylie; the police arrested the twenty-some participants and seized their materials (CMA Nov. 2011, para. 12).

In October 2011, Berbers students at Université de Sétif, in eastern Algeria, were the victims of (translation) "racially motivated attacks," according to the report by the CMA. The perpetrators were not prosecuted despite being known to the authorities (ibid.).

Among the sources it consulted, the Research Directorate did not find any other information concerning the July 2010 and October 2011 incidents reported by the CMA.

4.3 Treatment of Berbers by Islamists

According to the Middle East Quarterly, a renowned Kabyle singer has been the target of threats from Islamists (Middle East Quarterly, Spring 2010, 96).

According to the Director of the Centre d’études maghrébines en Algérie, a number of the founders of Algeria’s Islamist movement are Berbers (Director, Feb. 25, 2013).

Among the sources it consulted within time constraints, the Research Directorate could not find information pointing in the same direction as that provided by the Director or any other information on the treatment of Berbers at the hands of the Islamists.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References


La Tribune [Alger]. 22 April 2012. "Le 20 avril célébré par deux marches - Le RCD et les autonomistes marchent à Tizi Ouzou contre les élections ". (AllAfrica via Comtex/Factiva)

_____. 10 June 2010. "Alors que le Quai d'Orsay témoigne que la "spécificité culturelle Kabyle a été reconnue"- Condamnation unanime de l'annonce de Ferhat Mehegni ". (AllAfrica via Comtex/Factiva)


Additional Sources Consulted


Oral sources: A professor at Tufts University missed the deadline for providing information for the present response. Attempts at reaching representatives of the Maison des droits de l'homme et du citoyen Tizi Ouzou and of the Ligue algérienne pour la défense des droits de l'homme were unsuccessful.

Websites, including: Algérie Plus Online; Amnesty International; Centre de recherche berbère; eci.net; El Watan; Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network; France – Cour nationale du droit d'asile; Freedom House; Herald de Paris; Kabyle.com; Kabyles.Net; Liberté; Le Monde diplomatique; Mouvement pour l'autonomie de la Kabylie – Section Canada; United Nations – Refworld; Pambazuka News; World Almanac of Islamism.

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