

A must-explore opportunity

By H.E. ANDREW NOBLE

AMBASSADOR OF THE UNITED KINGDOM TO ALGERIA



ANDREW NOBLE joined the FCO in 1982. After postings in South Africa, Greece and Romania, he served in the security policy department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He was made deputy head of mission in Berlin in 2010. He has been ambassador to Algeria since June 2014.

Being the British Ambassador to Algeria is thoroughly rewarding for three main reasons: the size and intrinsic interest of this country, the importance of the work that my team and I perform and the warmth and openness of the Algerian people.

In all my meetings with new British visitors to Algeria I offer an account of the country. Invariably the journey from the airport to the Residence has already confounded their prior expectations.

This is the biggest country in Africa, the Arab world and the Mediterranean basin. It takes three hours to fly from south to north (and from east to west at the widest points). This vast size generates challenges of governance, security management and infrastructure which often require high-technology solutions. How do you deliver banking or IT services across these vast areas to scattered population hubs?

Of its 2.4 million square kilometres, only a narrow coastal strip is naturally fertile and densely populated. But the area of that narrow strip is almost the same as that of the entire United Kingdom. This area was developed into the granary of the Roman Empire and was one of the objects of French colonisation. Agriculture and the attendant food-based industries today represent some of Algeria's best development opportunities.

Although Algeria is a land of desert, it is also a land of water. Algeria has roughly a thousand kilometres of Mediterranean coastline and beaches. There is abundant seasonal rainfall in the mountains and on the coast. The Sahara hides an artesian ocean beneath its surface. These water resources are the key to development of some of the country's untapped potential. This is beginning to be realised, for example in the innovative Northern Irish-led Joint Venture to develop low-carbon milk production in the Sahara. The development of the shale gas industry in Algeria also relies on the subterranean reservoir.

Arabic is the official language, but the passion for the acquisition of English is real. French is still spoken very broadly and is likely to be the language used for most transactions with foreigners. There are also a number of Berber dialects spoken, of which Kabyle is the most common. Along with the linguistic variety comes a web of cultural and social customs which make travel a particular delight (whilst observing security constraints).

Algerian history is a unique combination of western and eastern influences which together produce a country reminiscent of its Mediterranean neighbours. Phoenicians, then Romans had their legacies largely destroyed by the Vandals who arrived from Spain in the 4th century. The Roman period gave us St Augustine of Hippo (Annaba in modern Algeria); the Algerian government has recently paid for an impressive restoration of the basilica in his name in the city. Roman Algeria (Mauretania) also produced at least one Algerian (Berber) Governor of Britain, Quintus Lollius Urbicus, builder of the Antonine Wall just beyond Hadrian's Wall. Despite the Vandals' best efforts, there are still impressive Roman remains to be seen in Tipaza (west of Algiers), Djamila and above all Timgad (both in the east of the country). Near Tipaza is an intriguing funerary monument to the daughter of Cleopatra and Mark Anthony!

Although the modern British public awareness of Algeria is sadly limited, our first bilateral link was established in 1585, making this amongst the oldest of British diplomatic relationships. The next couple of centuries produced a turbulent relationship. Extensive periods of peace were interrupted by the infamous pirates of the Barbary coast. Algiers was clearly more of a problem than any other of the pirates' home ports, though the technique of plundering shipping seems to have been practised at first by non-Algerians, including renegade British privateers. As our memory fades, the history of Barbary piracy is acquiring a mythical quality. But Algerians remember clearly the arrival of Lord Exmouth in 1816 at the head of a British fleet who wanted to deal once and forever with the pirate issue and laid waste a large part of Algiers.

But if the nineteenth century was ushered in by canon shot, it was quickly replaced by the development of Algiers as a centre for the British to avoid the rigours of a northern European winter. The Anglican church was developed. An "English quarter" was established, several of whose grand houses still exist today. Today's British Ambassadorial Residence was at one time a sort of British Community Club, such was the size of the community. Algeria cemented its place in many Britons' affections by its role in the liberation of North Africa during which period Winston Churchill was a popular (and much remembered) visitor.

In stark contrast to the forgotten violence of

the 17-19th centuries, Algeria has suffered for its independence, firstly in the war for liberation. One million Algerians (a tenth of the then population) are said to have lost their lives between 1954-1962. More recently, the period 1992-2002 saw up to 200,000 people killed in terrorist atrocities.

Algeria sees a continuing need to consolidate the national reconciliation it achieved at the end of the “black decade”. The examples of Libya and other countries in crisis in the region confirm the pre-eminence of a policy based on maintaining peace, stability and unity of the country. Algeria has a large number of political parties in its Parliament, including constitutional Islamist parties. It has a large and self-confident written media and a new collection of private TV stations jostling to report on and analyse the political and economic life of this vast country.

This is the context in which my staff and I are working to transform the United Kingdom’s relationship with Algeria. Prime Minister David Cameron visited Algeria in the wake of the tragic attack on the In Amenas gas plant in January 2013. Together with President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, he called for the construction of a modern relationship not limited to its historic outline. My predecessor, Martyn Roper, began the work to deliver a confident security partnership, drawing on our two countries’ long history of dealing with terrorism. Today, we have established a framework which delivers an ever-closer dialogue and practical cooperation.

The Prime Minister agreed to the Algerian request for a surge in English teaching in Algeria which the British Council is fully engaged in delivering. Direct teaching began in 2014 and supplements a close relationship with the Education Ministry which sees the British Council reaching over 5 million learners through the school system. I am greatly looking forward to the opening of the British Council teaching centre in Algiers in 2015.

The President and Prime Minister also called on us to overcome the self-imposed limitations on our commercial and economic relationship. Our countries we have worked closely for decades in the oil and gas sector. Indeed, BP today is Algeria’s largest foreign investor. We have just marked the 50th anniversary of the first ever shipment of Algerian LNG, which landed at Canvey Island. There has been a long relationship also in parts of our financial sector, with banks and insurance companies playing a prominent role, and there are a small number of British manufacturers in Algeria, such as Unilever and GSK.

But British interest in this market has

not really woken up to the modern opportunities. The size of Algeria’s reserves (approximately US\$200bn), its five-year investment pot (US\$260bn in 2015-9), its underused potential and its eager, young workforce are all components that make Algeria a must-explore opportunity. The Algerian government’s comprehensive plans offer good investment opportunities in all sectors.

The number of British majors and SMEs who are in the early phase of a relationship with Algeria is encouraging. Most of them seem to operate directly out of London. I would like to encourage that policy. Since Algiers is the 6th closest non-EU capital city to London, why be based anywhere else? A base in the Gulf (6-7 hours flying time) or in a neighbouring country to the north or west of Algeria really doesn’t add value to the British offer.

Why do the Algerians seek a much higher level of British engagement? I think the British brand has seven components in Algerian eyes: excellence of product/services, through-life support, first-class training opportunities for the Algerian workforce, the absence of corruption in British companies, the absence of bilateral historic baggage, top class ‘know-how’ and the English language.

We work closely with the Middle East Association, the Algeria British Business Council, the UK Algeria Business Council, the Algiers Chamber of Commerce, the Forum des Chefs des Entreprises in Algiers and of course with UKTI throughout the UK, as well as the Algerian government. My team and I stand ready to support any British company which is interested in exploring further. Andrew.Noble@fco.gov.uk

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HE Abdelmalek Sallal, Prime Minister of Algeria, with Rt Hon David Cameron MP, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom

