

The Agony of Algeria

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No country has paid a greater price for its independence than Algeria. Algerians often boast of the 'million martyrs' of their liberation war. It is only natural therefore that Algerians should be more than usually jealous of their sovereignty. It is this sentiment, which both the Government and Islamic fundamentalists have been exploiting for long. As Martin Stone, in his book *The Agony of Algeria* explains that the issues left unresolved after Algeria won independence in 1962 from France are at the root of its current crisis. Death is no stranger to the cobbled alleyways of the *Kasbahs* (small towns) in Algeria as hard to control as they were when French paras were fighting the National Liberation Front (FLN) four decades ago. However, the violence that is currently ravaging this country—claiming over 80,000 lives since 1992 when legislative elections supposedly won by Islamic fundamentalists were scrapped—is largely concentrated in the 'triangle of death' on the plain of Mitidja and Relizane province in the West.

The Liamine Zeroual Government has portrayed the three elections—presidential, parliamentary and local—held since 1995, as a return to democracy. The local elections held last year were the last step in a political process launched after the cancellation of elections in 1992. The Government's aim has been to rebuild Algeria's institutions, but without allowing any single party to challenge its rule, as Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) had done in 1991. The Zeroual regime has no doubt consolidated power by pushing the FIS from the political scene and setting up a new political system with a democratic face. These democratic elections, the official circles have argued, have removed "the legitimacy of armed struggle and the support for terrorism". But the Zeroual's hopes of elections providing the much-needed healing touch to the conflict razing since 1991, have been belied. Algeria has been bleeding from terrorism even though the Government has insisted in recent months that the continued violence was only "residual terrorism". Over 400 people were killed during the night of December 30-31 last year, the worst case of killing in the six years of violence. There are almost daily instances of women children and old men being killed with axes and sabres, then mutilated, sometimes beheaded or dismembered.

The official response is that these massacres are the work of Islamic terrorists. Some of the massacres have taken place suspiciously close to military installations. The military-backed regime might be turning a blind eye to massacres blamed on the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). What else explains reports of soldiers doing nothing to stop attacks they could see and hear from nearby barracks? There are analysts who maintain that perhaps the government thinks that continued terror justifies its continuance in power and its decision to exclude Islamists from the political process. Such an explanation is not fully convincing. The frequent massacres of innocent citizens, which grab national and international headlines in the media, hardly serve the regime's interests, since they make nonsense of its claim to have achieved normalcy. Indeed, its failure to protect the population from such acts is now seriously undermining its credibility both at home and abroad.

That the GIA and other Islamist groups are engaged in mindless violence is quite apparent. But it is also possible that these groups may have been infiltrated and manipulated by some elements within the military. The GIA, established in 1989, has challenged the political leadership of FIS and the military command of the Armed Islamic Movement (MIA). Its members consider GIA leaders as “scourges of god” dedicated to “purifying” Algeria by fire and steel. No one is immune from their attacks, not even their own supporters and sympathisers. The GIA has adopted violence as its creed. Its members have indulged in heinous acts of violence like decapitating, raping and cutting women’s breasts. Algerian newspapers have been almost unanimous in blaming the GIA for the massacres.

No guerilla war is clean. No army or police force fighting ruthless insurgents will maintain its honour unscathed. And the GIA, which had carved a unique and dreadful reputation for itself as the most savage guerilla army on earth, can expect little mercy at the hands of its government opponents. GIA men have attacked Algerian villages for more than a year, cutting the throats of women and children, burning babies alive on ovens, disemboweling pregnant women and slaughtering old men with axes. They have even employed a mobile guillotine on the back of a truck to execute their enemies. The Afghan –trained GIA militants are well used to the taste of blood and gore.

There are some who maintain that the powerful *eradicateurs* among the generals are using violence to punish those who supported the Islamists. But there is no proof. Omar Belloucet, editor of *Al-Watan* newspaper, poses certain questions on this score: “Is it possible that the army is incompetent? Is it possible that the army cannot go to heavily wooded areas like Relizane? These are all legitimate questions. But I don’t think it would be politically or intellectually correct to let the Islamists off the hook”.

Algerians look at strife with a notion of fatality, but also with lingering experience of the war of liberation against France from 1954 to 1962 that was far more brutal than the current crisis. The French occupation of Algeria was disgraceful from start to finish, which systematically oppressed the indigenous population, turning their mosques into churches, taking their best land, and leaving them impoverished. Much of the opposition against France was organised by the *moudjahidins*, when nationalism was defined largely by their religious heritage.

As Helen E. Purkitt says, “the present crisis engulfing Algeria”, reflects “longstanding tensions between the influence of Islamic culture (which began to dominate in the seventh century) and western culture (which arrived in the thirteen century), the loss of legitimacy of the post-independence political system and the growing economic problem heightened by a marked drop in oil and natural gas revenues, which account for most foreign revenue”. Algerian Islam traditionally focussed on the *marabout*, the village holy man; it was essentially apolitical and had nothing in common with today’s radical Islam, which is a graft from Khomeini’s Iran. While Islamic fundamentalists want to make Algeria another Islamic theocracy like Sudan or Iran, secularist Algerians view the fundamentalist attacks as an attempt to wipe out what they call the civil society.”

While leaders like Abassi Madani, Abdelkader Hachani, Rabah Kebir have shown their inclination to find a political solution at least on paper, leaders like Ali Benhadj and the so-called

internationalists, who are inspired by Iran and other foreign models are committed to an Islamic holy war, whatever that may mean. Leaders of FIS have to contend not only with the ultra-radical Islamic Armed Groups but also with its own military wing, the Islamic Salvation Army, which rejects any dialogue with the government.

Not all guerilla groups follow FIS guidelines. The GIA, which is notorious for murdering women and foreigners, consists of delinquents and mercenaries of the Afghan war. They have developed strong ties with other Islamic radicals in Afghanistan, Sudan and Iran. Much of the violence sweeping through the country is the work of neo-fundamentalists who do not heed the FIS any way.

Islamic groups like GIA have been increasingly ruthless and indiscriminate in their use of violence and they are intolerant in their social attitudes towards women and secular intellectuals. While people like Ali Benhadj, a prominent FIS leader, considers democracy as “apostasy”, others’ espousal of democracy is purely tactical. The FIS and other Islamists are only using democracy to thwart it. If they are allowed to have their say, says former US, Assistant Secretary of State Edward P. Djerejian, it could easily be a case of “one man, one vote, once.”

Hundreds of journalists, intellectuals, feminists and government officials have been killed since 1992. The Algerian government has a point when it maintains how can a dialogue be possible with those who adopt violence as their creed, people who decapitate, who rape and cut woman’s breasts and kill innocents. As Rachid Boudjedra, a novelist, maintains: “The GIA is to the FIS as the SS was to the Nazi party. It does the fundamentalist’s dirty work. To negotiate with the FIS is to collaborate with the cut-throats.” Journalists are working under such threats as “those who fight us with the pen will die by the blade”. Despite being made targets of Islamists’ depredations the intelligentsia has displayed remarkable toughness, absent in most of the Arab world.

The outside world has an imperfect understanding of violence and why it has reached such horrific levels. Are Islamists showing signs of desperation? Are they on their last legs? The Algerian Government’s claim after the completion of parliamentary and local elections that it is winning the war against Islamic zealots has proved to be a case of premature triumphalism. At the same time, the very fact that the militants are increasingly choosing soft targets suggests that they are engaged in mindless bloodletting to stay in public focus. The history of terrorism suggests that the group fearing isolation or suffering from defeats often spurs more extremist violence.

The Algerian crisis has also exposed the hypocrisy of the western world. Terrified of the prospect of an Islamist regime in Algiers, the west turned a blind eye to the army’s move and has since backed the country financially and otherwise in its drive to eradicate Islamist militants. Suddenly it feels indignant about the human rights abuses in Algeria as if only governments can perpetuate human rights abuses. Algerians have maintained that none can tell them how to deal with the ruthless terrorist of the GIA who are supported allegedly by some EU member states. As one senior Algerian Foreign Ministry official puts it, “Helping us fight terrorism means putting an end to the activities of Islamist networks in European countries and working for an international cooperation on terrorism.

What Algeria needs from the outside world at the moment is neither a sermon to its leaders on how to manage its affairs nor humanitarian assistance for its long-suffering populations but every encouragement it can receive in its endeavour to curb terrorism. This, in substance, is what the Algerian Government has said to the European Union when it rejected the latter's initiative to send a team to probe the latest cases of gruesome massacres. The Algerian Government also says that international inquiries would lend moral and political weight to terrorists and all those factions inciting violence in Algeria. These arguments are no doubt valid but does not Algiers crave international respectability and admit foreign correspondents from time to time, as it did during the parliamentary and municipal elections?

FIS leaders like Abdelkader Hachani have maintained that the massacres can be stopped if the west persuades the government to talk to its opponent Hachani also condemned the killings as "crimes against humanity" and as the government has done everything to fuel this violence". The Algerian regime knows that the FIS' writ no longer runs among the militants and GIA does not believe or understand the language of dialogue. The best way to answer Europeans' growing demands on Algiers to come clean would be to have a firmer grip on the militancy situation. If violence continues on the existing scale, as it was witnessed in recent months, the outside world would certainly suspect governmental complicity or its ineptitude.