

ALGERIA

and the making of a civil war



Now entering its eighth year, the civil war in Algeria shows no sign of imminent resolution. Yet little has been written about one of modern history's most savage and incomprehensible civil wars. While the scope of the conflict has been reduced in recent years, its brutality remains undiminished. But what is it exactly that is being fought over? By **OLGA YOLDI**

On a winter afternoon in January 1995 a car loaded with TNT exploded in front of the Algiers headquarters of the Sûreté Nationale on the boulevard Amirouche. At this time of day carnage was inevitable. An overcrowded bus passed in front of the car at the precise moment of the explosion. The street was crowded with people buying food for the start of the holy fasting month of Ramadan. In a matter of seconds blood, limbs, clothes and papers littered the pavement; several limbs had to be removed from the roofs of nearby buildings.

Forty-two people were killed and more than 250 injured. Although this was the worst single bombing in the history of independent Algeria, the same week 30 members of the security forces had been killed, four children kidnapped and a French resident murdered. The Armed Islamic Group, GIA (a Sunni fun-

damentalist organisation) claimed responsibility for all the killings.

Antar Zouabri, one of the GIA leaders has defined the GIA's campaign in terms of an 'all-out war'. He said that there would be no dialogue or truce in the struggle against the illegitimate, secular Algerian government. "God does not negotiate or engage in discussion," he added. His mission is 'to found a true Islamic state': should innocents perish in the course of achieving his divine mission, then so be it. Zouabri has also explained that the killing of 'apostates' or those who are not a part of the Islamic movement, is a duty for him and his followers. According to him, the Prophet excuses the murder of innocents, as revealed in a verse from the Qu'ran Zouabri quoted: "I am innocent of those killed because they were associated with those who had to be fought."

So far the civil war has claimed

100,000 lives and thousands of people have been wounded since the military coup d'état of January 1992. For the last eight years armed raids, village massacres, terrorist bombings and weekly kidnappings and assassinations have occurred regularly. The war has victimized Algerian society as a whole, from the urban elites to the village poor. While the body count continues to rise, the war remains shrouded in a haze of uncertainty and lack of information. The violence, which has often targeted intellectuals and foreigners, has also driven the international press out of the country. But the massacres of civilians during the summer of 1997 focused the world community's attention for the first time on the secret tragedy going on in Algeria between the Islamists and the military regime.

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in his election campaign promised

to reconcile Algerians in order to put an end to the bloodshed. The question is, can he really set a dynamic of reconciliation going? Or will the violence continue to rage for years to come?

THE QUEST FOR A NATIONAL IDENTITY

One hundred and thirty years of French occupation left a deeply divided nation. For decades Algerians seem to have been torn between East and West, between the French and Arabic languages and between traditionalism and modernism. The question of national identity still provokes heated debate among politicians and the Algerian people, particularly between the Berbers and the Arab majority, between French thinking intellectuals and those oriented towards Arabisation.

The Algerian independence struggle (1954-62) was one of the most bitter and bloody wars of self-determination in history. The war was not merely a struggle between colonisers (the French) and the colonised (Muslims.) Algeria was compared with South Africa as the war was between *piè noirs* (Algerians of French descent,) who wanted to remain in their native land under French protection and the indigenous Muslims who demanded self-determination at any cost. Acts of barbarism were committed on both sides.

The Evian Accords officially ended eight years of war and 130 years of French rule. Algeria then was allowed to establish its own political order by becoming an independent state, as defined in Western terms. The French government recognised the National Liberation Front, (FLN) as the sole legal representative of the Algerian people, (the FLN included a diverse range of groups of different political tendencies who united to fight the French). But the factionalism, within the FLN that seven years of war had suppressed emerged in the months leading to independence. The FLN however would become the only political force in Algeria.

When independence was finally achieved Algeria was left with its

economy in a shambles. Cities looked like ghost towns, government institutions had been dismantled and most professionals and technicians (mostly *piè noirs*) had fled the country in what has been described as one of the greatest mass migrations of the 20th century.

The fathers of the revolution decided that socialism was the way to go. Nevertheless they adopted a strange combination of third world socialism, Western European democracy, pan-Arabism and Islam in an attempt to appeal to all sectors of Algerian society.

Ben Bella (1962-5) was the first prime minister of independent Algeria to introduce socialism. His leadership represented a period of great uncertainty. He was overthrown in a coup d'état by Houari Boumedienne. Boumedienne (1965-78) who was more of a pragmatist, established the institutions of government and was able to negotiate successfully with the Islamists and other major players. One of Boumedienne's contributions was to lay the foundations for a modern industrialised economy. His government nationalised minerals, banking, insurance and the manufacturing sector.

The flood of petrodollars made possible by the 1973 OPEC oil price increases accelerated development through a policy of 'industrialising industries.' He launched the Arabisation program. Education, health and housing improved during his leadership. But by institutionalising government a new class of bureaucrats and technocrats, (all members of the FLN) emerged, and destroyed the myth of an egalitarian society.

Boumedienne's vision was to create a model for post-colonial Africa: a socialist model of self-sufficiency based on the spirit of the revolution. However he didn't manage to see the result of his efforts since he died suddenly of a rare blood disease.

His reforms have been described as disappointing. Problems associated with an over rapid industrial development, low productivity and foreign

debt would haunt Algeria for years to come. Nevertheless Boumedienne's era could still be described as one of the most stable and prosperous in post colonial Algeria.

THE END OF SOCIALISM

The heavy dependence on a petrochemical based economy led to serious national revenue declines in the 1980s in Algeria, as the world price of oil plummeted (with earnings falling by 40%). This had a devastating impact on the welfare state created by Boumedienne. President Chadli Benjedid, who assumed the presidency in 1979, launched a series of constitutional and economic reforms. With a foreign debt of \$US24 billion the regime decided to introduce a wide range of austerity packages to cover the shortfall.

As the welfare state was declining the population was growing. An uncontrollable birthrate created one of the youngest populations in the world (65% under 25 years of age) many of whom were unemployed. Overpopulation in the cities created a permanent housing crisis and a strain on the education system and the infrastructure.

In view of the social and economic problems Bendjedid decided to abandon his commitment to socialism and replaced it with a commitment to economic liberalisation. Encouraged by the IMF, he accelerated the process of structural reform designed to diminish state control and move towards a market economy. The increasing impoverishment caused by the austerity measures caused widespread resentment, which led to the riots of October 1988, when students organised a number of demonstrations in several cities. The violence was savagely repressed by the government, resulting in the death of 500 people at the hands of the security forces. The riots were a reaction to the hesitant economic reforms, rising youth unemployment and shattered social and political expectations.

Anxious to repair his credibility ►

Bendjedid then proceeded to reform the constitution and decided to embrace democracy. The new constitution guaranteed a multi party democratic system. As a result 28 parties applied for registration. The most significant being the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), the Front of Socialist Forces (FFS) and the Movement for the Democracy in Algeria (MDA).

Martin Stone in his book *The Agony of Algeria* writes: "Although the reforms were ground-breaking they did not represent a genuine commitment to democracy. Rather, the regime resorted to political pluralism in order to outflank its opponents. Bendjedid's eager acceptance of the subsequent proliferation of political parties reflected his desire to see the Islamists outmanoeuvred."

But the Islamists were becoming very popular particularly among the students, the marginalised, the dispossessed: unemployed youth, immigrants from rural areas and those who had become disillusioned with socialism.

The first ever free, fair and multiparty, municipal and provincial elections took place in June 1990 which saw the overwhelming victory of the Islamic Salvation Front FIS and the humiliating defeat of the FLN, the party of the state and the army!

The results of the elections shocked the entire Algerian political elite. They indicated that people were tired of the old order and desperately wanted change. Many people saw the success of the FIS as an act of revenge against the FLN-state.

During 18 months in local government FIS counsellors worked hard to improve the social and economic conditions of their constituencies by promoting a sense of community, mutual aid and the Islamist model. They proclaimed that they wanted to restore the dignity of the Algerian people. Expectations were then raised that an Islamic state would be created.

The regime then launched a campaign to undermine the FIS in every possible way and prevent their success in the forthcoming national

elections by reforming the electoral legislation, imposing martial law and arresting 700 FIS members. When the national elections were rescheduled for December 1991 and the FIS was once again on the verge of winning, the army staged a coup d'état, sacked Bendjedid and ended the democratic experiment.

THE DESCENT INTO WAR

The interruption of the elections, the dissolution of the FIS by the government and the imprisonment of its leaders: Abassi Madani and Ali Benhadj put an end to any legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of those who voted for the party.

A violent campaign by FIS supporters and the Islamic Armed Movement MIA, followed. Initially the security forces were ordered to occupy and suppress any revolts in areas where FIS followers lived. As a result many people were arrested, humiliated and tortured.

When Prime Minister Liamine Zéroual became President in 1994, he announced he was prepared for political dialogue with all factions, including the Islamists if they renounced the use of violence. He had in fact already held secret talks with the imprisoned Leaders Belhadj and Madani. He placed them under house arrest, enabling contact with political associates and creating a moment of hope for political compromise. Unfortunately the extremists on both sides closed down this first attempt at negotiation and as a result the chance of preventing the civil war.

In the following months the regime launched a harsh offensive against the Islamists. Two new Islamist factions had emerged: the Islamic Salvation Front, GIA and the Movement for an Islamic State, MEI which declared the jihad against the hated regime. In view of the support provided to Islamists by the people of the communes in greater Algiers, the military then decided to launch a strategy of isolating those areas. Researcher Luis Martinez, who lived in Algiers during the 1990s, in his book *La Guerre Civile en Algérie* he writes:

"In municipalities where armed Islamist groups lived, the regime abandoned the local people to their fate. There thus developed a feeling of insecurity due to the presence of many actors using violence (thieves, criminals, armed Islamist groups, informers)...the Islamist order ceased to reign there and petty traders complained of theft. To this problem were added protection rackets by soldiers stationed nearby. Believing that they were in enemy territory, the soldiers made the people pay for the risks they were facing by direct extortion of goods".

All these groups placed an enormous financial and psychological burden on the local population. Not only did they have to provide for their needs but were terrified of being associated with either group. If they were seen as supporting the Islamists they ran the risk of being murdered by the army. But being seen in the company of soldiers could be a prelude to murder by the Islamists. Many merchants, shopkeepers, engineers, labourers were knifed or shot to death. Sometimes entire families were murdered.

Luis Martinez writes: "criminals became fully-fledged players on the urban guerrilla stage. Sometimes they were called police informers by Islamist sympathisers, while on other occasions they were condemned as Islamist allies by the other side. In fact they operated on their own account collaborating with both groups according to the local balance of forces."

In the absence of a police force Armed Islamic Bands led by Emirs (Arabic word for leader) were created in order to stop crime and protect the local population. The Emirs declared war on the criminals who were told to disappear or convert to Islam and join the GIA, which many of them did. Nevertheless criminals continued to fluctuate between the Islamists and the armed forces, practicing extortion, sometimes for the GIA's benefit, other times on their own, ►

Woman walking past a reconciliation
poster in Algiers



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LA CONCORDE CIVILE

protected by the security forces. Seeing criminals parading with the Islamists caused even more confusion and insecurity among the local population, who by then found it impossible to distinguish between friend and foe.

The Emirs took over the communes and emerged as the new GIA leaders. Initially they put an end to the proliferation of criminals, as time went by they managed to hold the monopoly of violence. They practiced extortion particularly from the traders who alone had to bear the burden of providing for their needs. The Emirs, who claimed to represent their commune committed atrocities acting with total impunity. The armed struggled had been adulterated by criminal activity.

As a response, the army then created the militias, made up of civilians fed up with the Emirs, who became active participants in the anti guerrilla effort. Unemployed young people had now more options, they could choose between joining the GIA, the militia or the army.

THE POLITICS OF CHAOS

During the mid 1990s massacres occurred regularly. As many as 500 people were killed a day. According to the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, the GIA committed numerous abuses such as beheading, mutilating, disemboweling and dismembering their victims, including infants, children and pregnant women. These terrorists committed dozens of rapes of female victims, many of whom were murdered thereafter. They also targeted families of government forces and the military. Some killings were attributed to revenge, banditry and land grabs.

"The street was filled with dead people, when people went out and saw that they wanted to die also, they banged their heads against the wall, women shouted and wept. It was terrible to see that, there were only young men on the ground covered with blood, they were like dogs that died in the street. They were killed because they were soldiers..." a gov-

ernment worker said to an interviewer a week before being murdered.

Most attacks occurred at night. Night time was chosen deliberately for it allowed the perpetrators to avoid being recognised in the daytime. In most cases security forces would reach the site of massacres too late to prevent civilian casualties. Their failure to intervene in time led to claims that the security forces were and continue to be indifferent to or complicit in the massacres.

The atrocities generated a proliferation of conspiracy theories that sought to explain the violence by pointing a finger at one or another. While the perpetrators —the security forces and Islamists— have been acknowledged, their motives and true identities have often been questioned. Paul A Silverstein in his article "Regimes of (Un)Truth" writes:

"The tactics and appearances of both military and Islamist forces have been strikingly similar. Military personnel in urban areas mask themselves in order to hide their identities and prevent reprisals. While presenting their actions as police (rather than military) procedures, their conduct does not comply with legal scrutiny. For instance, no "terrorist" has ever been publicly tried. Meanwhile, the Islamist militias tend to act like state forces, dressing up in military garb, stopping cars at false roadblocks, searching the vehicles and demanding the occupant's identification papers...They question how Islamist militants continue to operate with near impunity, perform sensational attacks in close proximity to military and police bases and yet manage to flee without any casualties."

Algeria became one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists. Many were killed and 500 fled the country as the GIA spokesperson announced that "those who fight by the pen shall die by the sword." The killing and kidnapping of foreigners sent a message that no foreigners were welcome in Algeria.

PRISONERS OF AN ENDLESS WAR

Economic arguments have often been used to explain the war in Algeria. Sami Nair, a Professor of Political Science of Algerian background at the Sorbonne in Paris says: "what is happening in Algeria is not a civil war in the classic and simple sense of the word. It is not a simple war between the rich and those who want to change, revolutionise the society. It is a war between those who have power and those who are outside the power structures. It is a war between the elite who have been integrated into the national and international economic system and the dispossessed. It is also a war between those who subscribe to European values and those who cannot access those values and who close in on themselves with more or less archaic religious values."

Luis Martinez argues that the continuation of the war has been possible thanks to the economic reforms promoted by the IMF. In 1994 the government negotiated with the IMF on rescheduling the debt and launching the Structural Adjustment Plan, involving the full liberalisation of trade and the privatisation of state enterprises. Implementing this program was a pre-condition for obtaining loans and credits which would alone be able to finance what the regime called the 'security oriented policy'.

These arrangements contributed to the development of the economy, and released considerable resources, but they also helped to strengthen the GIA. "The reforms were a weapon of war. They worked in the regime's favour but at the same time paradoxically augmented the financial resources of the enemy, the GIA. For trade liberalisation also provided an opportunity for the budding war economy of the Emirs, their involvement in the trading economy through the creation of import-export companies, increased their funds and thus their capacity for funding," Martinez writes.

Job opportunities were created for young people by the government. The introduction of the market economy also created business opportunities for the elite and the traders, however the economic benefits of the liberalisation did not reach the people of the communes who continued to be poor, marginalised and economically dependent on the Islamist armed groups.

The Emirs succeeded in consolidating their groups focusing on the economic rather than military activity (bank robberies, protection rackets, illicit business, hijacking goods in transit etc.) As a result they distanced themselves from the original Islamist ideals and the initial struggle against the regime as well as from the FIS and the other Islamic parties.

After 8 years of civil war neither the army nor the Islamists have succeeded in winning the war. The prospect of establishing an Islamic state by force of arms has become increasingly remote. In these circumstances one would ask oneself, what is the point of continuing with the killing?

The fact is most sectors have been able to benefit from this conflict, which still continues to drive the political and economic agenda. Negotiations would inevitably have to involve the GIA, however the GIA leaders have nothing to gain from a compromise between the regime and the FIS. The end of the war would mean for the Emirs regressing to their precarious situation. In fact the future of the Emirs lies precisely in the war which can bring maximum return to their investment.

Thanks to the war the army has been able to expand, modernise itself and progress as a result, producing new wealth for the military. The government on the other hand was able to exploit the Islamist threat in clever ways. Over eight years of civil war the regime has been able to gain international political support, in the form of finance, particularly from France. It has exploited fears that the Islamic conflict would cause the massive emi-

gration of Algerians to France, the loss of economic interests, and most importantly, the risk of the export of terrorism.

The opening up of the oil and gas sector to foreign investors reinforced not only the economic survival but the defense of the regime. British Petroleum, Exxon, Repsol have invested heavily in Algeria in spite of the conflict. The companies were guaranteed the possibility of ensuring their own security by recruiting mercenaries.

The fact remains that prolonging the war has dreadful political and social consequences, however everything suggests that in spite of the social tragedies, the profound suffering that it causes, the civil war in Algeria is there to stay.

Compromise will only come when both sides believe they have more to lose than to gain from the fighting. As Richard K Betts has pointed out: "To make peace is to decide who rules. Making peace means determining how the war ends." In Algeria there is still a long way to go to meet these challenges. ■

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