

## **From Socialism to Religious Radicalism: The Algerian Journey Towards Terrorism**

Ouadie Adimi  
Doctoral Student  
Graduate School of Global Studies, Doshisha University

### **Abstract:**

This paper describes the steady radicalization process of Algerian society since its struggle for independence in 1962, a process that evolved into the bloody civil war known as the Black Decade thirty years later. This paper argues that Algeria has been subject to influences that are specific to its national context rather than the usual trans Arab approach found in literature.

Following the aftermath of the war of independence, Algerian society reflected a euphoric, united, and ambitious society. Yet, by 1988 Algerians had struggled their way into a society that was polarized, alienated from the state and its institutions and heavily politicized. All of this occurred in the midst of a massive oil price crash. This paper retraces the influences that led Algerian society from the euphoria of achieving independence to socialism and nationalism, quickly followed by disenchantment with charismatic leaders and political outcomes before finally resorting to violence.

### **Keywords:**

Radicalization Process, Socialism, Islamism, Algeria, FLN.

## 1. Introduction

Certain journals and government publications suggest that the death toll was about 100,000 deaths,<sup>1</sup> according to others Algeria has lost 150,000 of its children to terrorism,<sup>2</sup> yet others assert it is possibly even more.<sup>3</sup> Additional debates revolve around the nature of the massacre; academics talk about a civil war; the Algerian authorities about terrorism. Lately Ramtane Lamamra, the influential Algerian ex foreign minister challenged a RT journalist by continuously interrupting or correcting her as she used the terms “civil war” referring to Algeria's Black Decade, “...*It was a war against terrorism... Algerians were not divided. It was not a civil war;*”<sup>4</sup> he repeatedly said to the growingly confused journalist. This confusion has always benefited the Algerian regime, it knew the Occident bias in regard to terminologies associated with radicals, fundamentalists, Islamists or with the French term *integrists*.<sup>5</sup> The Algerian regime used this confusion to justify its muscular interventions such as the abortion of the democratic process in 1991. Algerians at that time had opted for the FIS (*Front Islamique du Salut*, (translates to Islamic Salvation Front)) a religious party making radical speeches instead of the FLN (*Front de Liberation National*) a socialist party still hanging on to the euphoria of the war of independence.

As the army intervened and hijacked the electoral process, denying victory to the FIS, Algeria was forced into the civil war (or war against terrorism) that became known as the Black Decade. “*We voted FIS to terminate the FLN,*”<sup>6</sup> stated a female Algerian reporter. “*We did not vote FIS, we voted against the FLN...*”<sup>7</sup> adds her colleague. As female reporters (retired) their gender and vocation by default made them top targets for extreme Islamists. Indeed, women whose manner of dress did not comply with *Sharia* law, as well as reporters, were prime targets for assassinations. Yet these retired female reporters affirm they had voted FIS in 1991. This sharp contrast among others is of prime interest to this research; considering on the one hand the Algerian socialist past as well as the heroic icon that represented the FLN, and on the other hand, the radical speeches of Ali Benhadj, the FIS cofounder. Why did the Algerians vote en masse for FIS? How did Algerian society transition from socialism and glorious nationalism to religious radicalism? In order to address these questions, it is essential to first outline the Algerian social context and clarify what is meant by socialism and religious radicalism.

Independent Algerian society first embraced socialism and nationalism by default as it was associated with heroic leaders. However, as socialist charismatic leaders failed economically and politically, disenchantment with politics became general leading to massive acceptance of religious radicalism as a replacement. Also certain pre-socialism

events, although leading towards a leftist ideology, have played an important role in the radicalization process and should be highlighted. Furthermore, simply evoking socialism does not allow the reader to grasp the context in which the Algerians felt a change was needed. Clarification of what was meant by socialism, more precisely what socialism truly meant to the Algerians, must be addressed. Finally, and by far a more delicate task, this research shall identify those so easily referred to as religious radicals by defining and identifying this paper's population of interest.

In the course of two excursions to Algeria's capital as well as Setif (Algeria's second most populated city) the researcher held discussions with ex ministers, political science and sociology professors, PhD students, ex militants, researchers and activists as well as retired army officers. Interviewees patiently engaged in passionate debates about the steady radicalization process that ended with the Algerian Black Decade. Among the literature available on this topic, the works conducted by Hugh Robert as well as McCauley & Moskalenko in particular have been invaluable in understanding the role of societal alienation in fostering radicalism.

## 2. Contemporary Algeria

If history is written by the victors, then the FLN has written Algeria's history, and has probably omitted certain elements and events that would suggest it was not the sole and legitimate fighter of the Algerian liberation war. One such omitted event is the founding in 1931 of a reformist association known as *Jam 'iyyat al-'Ulamā' al-Muslimīn al-Jazā'iriyīn*, which translates to the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars. This Muslim reformist association led by Ben Badis has had a massive impact on Algerian society as it vigorously and effectively opposed on two fronts the assimilation movement launched by Ferhat Abbas and the spread of Maraboutism. To those that followed Ferhat Abbas and wished Algerians and Algeria to be part of the French republic, Ben Badis' reformists replied, "*Islam is my religion, Arabic my language, Algeria my fatherland.*"<sup>8</sup> The reformists' ideology as highlighted by their slogan insisted on the inseparability of Islam from the nation, from the very identity of the Algerians. On the other front, and with perhaps more repercussions, Ben Badis tackled the spread of local and tribal interpretations of Islam that were often based on the cult of saints, the dead, and spirits. These practices were known as Maraboutism and were sometimes referred to as charlatanism.<sup>9</sup>

Due to the very low level of literacy Maraboutism had deep roots in Algerian society.

Under French colonialism Algerians were systematically denied education. Over 90 percent were illiterate during French colonization.<sup>10</sup> Being incapable of reading the Qur'an, Algerians adapted their faith to their culture, knowledge, and rites, most of which were passed down the generations, losing ties with the Qur'an.<sup>11</sup> As a result, due to its religious variety, Algerian society displayed a form of social heterogeneity that forced Algerians to look for identity on the local sphere rather than the national one. However, by successfully addressing these rituals and facilitating the spread of a Sunni Islam, the reformists established two important social factors that changed the face of Algerian society for decades.

By putting an end to tribal and regional religious rituals, the reformists enabled the emergence of a uniform society based on common Islamic values. This fashioned a nationwide Algerian union with a common religion linking ethnic minorities and regional factions. Since the majority of Algerians were illiterate they had to rely on an urban elite in order to return to a purely scriptural Islam, and this effectively centralized sources of leadership.<sup>12</sup> These two elements initiated by the reformists' association set the foundations on which the Algerian revolution would be built: a nation united by Islam under a centralized authority.

Conversely, the builders, those who initiated the war of independence, were ideologically very far from Ben Badis and his followers. Indeed it was a group of urban revolutionaries under the FLN banner that led the revolution against the occupier. The FLN began as a secular, (but far from atheist) elitist, mainly French taught urban group that did not speak with the same accent, wear the same clothes, or share the same traditions as the majority of peasants that constituted Algeria. This elite relied on common cultural and religious ties to connect them to the masses. Certainly, the strongest bond that linked most Algerians and distinguished them from the French invader was Islam. But it was not the only one, the FLN took over all factions of Algerian society (Islamists, Berberists, socialists and feminists) by convincing them to join in the battle for a free Algeria.

From 1954 to 1962 the question of what a free Algeria would look like was not addressed. The war was the priority, and a free Algeria the prize. However, as soon as independence was declared all social movements, except perhaps the leftists, felt betrayed as Algeria embraced socialism and the victorious FLN immediately lost its appeal and legitimacy with the people as it found itself plagued with internal conflicts and assassinations.<sup>13</sup> After 132 years of fierce colonialism and eight years of bloody war, an uneasy Algerian society emerged under the firm grip of Ben Bella, free Algeria's first

President.

Discontentment quickly became obvious and widespread as Ben Bella's regime failed to address Algeria's economic and social issues. The government kept making unrealistic, unachievable, and extravagant promises, but with a country mainly composed of rural peasants or *mujahidin*, of which 90 percent could not read or write, the regime could never deliver. Ben Bella's severe leftist agenda rapidly alienated most of the former FLN leadership along with a majority of the Algerian urban middle class.<sup>14</sup>

It was then not a surprise that in 1965, only three years after independence, Algeria witnessed its first coup. Despite all appearances the FLN had continued its internal conflicts and shaky legitimacy until the coup led by Boumediene in 1965. Boumediene was not necessarily the most suited for the position but certainly the most powerful. The influential minister of defense had by then turned his *mujahidin* into a conventional army. His obedient, well-trained and heavily armed military force proudly paraded the streets of Algiers following the coup. Houari Boumediene projected the aura of a strong leader who was powerful enough to provide the Algerian government with a sense of legitimacy. Algerians had found their leader at last. An almighty, Arabic speaking, authoritarian, socialist leader.

Within this context several currents of opinion collided and attempted to pull free Algeria in various directions. Among these currents the most influential were the socialist and Islamist movements. However, the Islamists were not a monolithic element. It was then, and still is, a nebula of factions that share some common values but may be very different in other aspects. The distinctions are many and variously sharp or blurry between radicals, Salafists, extremists, fundamentalists, Islamists, and their affiliates.

Ultimately, these ideologies converge towards the same end - a government led and ruled by *Sharia* law, and to achieve this goal the use of violence is (usually) not excluded by any of the above groups.<sup>15</sup> However, who qualifies to use violence and towards whom it should be directed is a point of disagreement between the ideologies. The Salafists for instance, mainly direct their attention towards the society rather than the state, whereas the extremists desire a top-down change.<sup>16</sup> The radicals, on the other hand, adopt a more pragmatic approach to the use of violence and choose symbols or governmental institutions and officials rather than plain civilians as is also the case for extremists.<sup>17</sup>

On the eve of the Algerian civil war, all these tendencies within the core ideology were identifiable in Algeria. The extremists, trained for combat by the USA to resist the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, had won the war against the Soviets and returned with high expectations concerning the future of Algeria and the role they could play. The Islamists led

by the populist Ali Benhadj would constitute the greatest political challenge the Algerian regime faced. The fundamentalists led by other main religious figures such as Nahnah, promoted moderation and rejected the use of violence but maintained a desire to build a morally and spiritually sound society.<sup>18</sup> Other radicals effortlessly shifted from one sub-ideology to another yet consistently opposed a Westernized political leadership system and requested a return to an Islamic political system.

Prior to the civil war any individual could adhere to several subgroups at the same time and the various sub-movements would compete with or overlap one another simultaneously. However, within this social tangle a key component is of specific interest to this research. That is, an alienated society that appears tolerant to violence against the state, a society that became ideologically aligned with the radical movement. These attributes turned Algerian society into an ideal ecosystem to support the growth of Islamist ideology and its sub ideologies. Therefore, this paper's center of interest is not the radicals themselves but rather the social dynamics that enabled radical Islam to express itself. An alienated, polarized, and hopeless society on the brink of civil war, saw the incumbent regime as an extension of the former colonial administration. Algerian society was so desperately in crisis that it believed salvation would spring from the Islamists, and the Islamists alone.

### **3. The Boumediene era (1965-1978)**

Although it is only after Boumediene's death in 1978 that radicalism rose in Algeria to a significant extent, his presidency represents a key factor in the radicalization process within Algerian society.<sup>19</sup> Indeed despite Boumediene's wise moves to limit or redirect the spread of religious radicalism (probably an example of best practice), the socialist agenda he led during the second half of his administration still planted the seeds of radicalism in Algeria. Whether Algeria was to pursue religious, nationalist or socialist radicalism, the latter half of Boumediene's presidency left a divided, polarized and alienated Algerian society and Islamism merely catalyzed that frustration.

Boumediene took over in June 1965, exactly two years before the Six-Day War between Israel and Arab states, during which charismatic Arab leaders such as Gamal Abdel Nasser faced a humiliating defeat. The Arab-Israel Six-Day War is often cited as one of the major reasons why charismatic Arab leaders lost popular admiration, leaving room for religious figures. The outcome of the war sparked not only a waning of trust in Arab leaders but also a more vehement denial of the notion of nation states by Muslims across the Arab world.

However, in the case of Algeria it appears that Boumediene's domestic reputation did not suffer from this catastrophic event.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, following the war, Algerian nationalism challenged the notion that it represented a mere replica of Egyptian Nasserism or the Syrian Baath. Algerian nationalism expressed throughout Boumediene's administration had deep roots in the most popular revolution the Arab world had witnessed, the Algerian revolution against France - in which Boumediene played an active role. Furthermore, as the Algerian leader boldly and openly criticized Nasser and Egypt from the point of view of a revolutionary undefeated Arab state, the Algerians distanced themselves from the shameful outcome of the war and its consequences.<sup>21</sup> While most Arab societies looked elsewhere (towards fundamentalism) for leadership, the Algerians looked at their secular, socialist leader for guidance, thus embracing socialism by default.

In the early 1970s, Boumediene's regime launched what would be known as "*La Revolution Socialiste*" social and economic revolution built on three agendas: an industrial, agricultural, and cultural awakening.<sup>22</sup> One important aspect of the cultural feature of the revolution was that Arabic should replace French as well as the colloquial Algerian Arabic known as *Dardja* (A mix of Arabic, Amazigh - a minority native language, and French). The regime also refused to recognize Amazigh as an official language and imposed Arabic on ethnic minorities, in effect marginalizing this segment of society. The Amazigh resisted the state's assault by refusing to use Arabic and opted for French whenever they could to protest the denial of ethnic recognition. This opposition to the use of Arabic created the first crack in Algerian society.

Yet the Arabization program had deeper impacts and divided even those that were not part of any ethnic minority. Hugh Roberts, an academic specialized in Algerian religious radicalism, published an article in 1988 of prime importance as it portrayed the steady polarization that Boumediene's cultural revolution was provoking. Teaching English to high school students in a small town in Algeria, (1973-4) Roberts could observe the intensity of the linguistic polarization that was developing between those who stood for French as a language and those from more modest backgrounds that chose Arabic. A sentence in his publication summarizes the polarization in process, "*The Arabisants class was permanently demoralized and unteachable; it knew that it was not being seriously educated, just kept off the streets...*"<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of the realities of the situation, the regime decided that Algerians would be Arabic speakers. As the country could not provide enough teachers, Boumediene imported them from the Middle East (notably Egypt). It is conceivable that these teachers brought with

them their views on political leaders, the *Umma Islamiya* and *Sharia* law. However, the main issue at the time appeared to be that those who chose Arabic were generally coming from rural areas. They were strong in numbers but from a poorer background and did not have any kind of network or basic tools to secure a job after schooling. The Arabization program slowly became a sort of caste system in which those that spoke only Arabic were at the bottom of the social and economic pyramid.<sup>24</sup> Indeed as most companies were previously run in French and continued using business French as a language until today, these *Arabisants* had no chance to compete with the French-taught elite.

Learning Arabic was not in itself the cause of societal polarization in Algeria, but the fact that opportunities were not equally available for those who were educated in Arabic, in contrast to those who choose French, was one of the most important factors contributing to the radicalization of Algerian society. Although scholars do not agree on the causality between poverty and radicalization this research supports the view that having unequal (or perceived unequal) access to opportunities is a major cause for radical actions.<sup>25</sup>

Yet at that time anger was not directed towards the regime or Boumediene but rather against *Les Francisants* (Pro French Algerians) who were perceived as plaguing Algerian politics and economics. Boumediene on the other hand was described as the defender of the poor Arab speaking Muslims, a leader who was attempting to build a nation that embraced Arabic as a language despite the *Francisants*' attempts to sabotage it. Boumediene was later also perceived as the defender of Islamic values despite being a very secular leader. He gained the approval of the religious sphere via a strategic coup against the growing power of Islamists, a masterpiece of anti-radicalization that demonstrates best policy put into practice.

Prior to Boumediene's coup, an association named *Al Qiyam* (The Values) was created in 1964 by two important religious figures. The association was careful not to oppose Ben Bella's regime but had as a main objective the desire to reestablish a society based on Islamic values and morals.<sup>26</sup> As *Al Qiyam* grew in numbers, with some five thousand members attending its meetings in Algiers alone, it saw its ambitions grow as well, as expressed by the following statement published in its journal, in 1965:

All political parties, all regimes and all leaders which do not base themselves on Islam are decreed illegal and dangerous. A communist party, a secular party, a Marxist-socialist party, (...) cannot exist in the land of Islam.<sup>27</sup>

It is in these circumstances that Boumediene took over, faced with a growing religious

rivalry he used a very effective tactic that not only eliminated the radical threat but also consolidated his position in the religious sphere. In 1966, Boumediene's regime first dissolved *Al Qiyam* in the capital, Algiers, but to avoid clashes allowed it to continue its activities outside of the capital until 1970 when the organization was totally dissolved. However, instead of causing retaliation and pushing the group's members underground, the state quickly maneuvered and established moral reforms. The reforms matched *Al Qiyam's* demands but were carefully and publicly implemented by Boumediene's freshly elected minister of religious affairs, thus reclaiming leadership over the religious sphere.<sup>28</sup> Boumediene's regime, which had already secured its grip over the military as well as politics by taking over the FLN, also became the defender of the Arabic language and Islamic values.

The only thing Boumediene lacked was support for his leftist agenda. Following his coup, Boumediene had to erase the leftists who were still faithful to Ben Bella but in order to impose his *revolution socialiste* Boumediene needed a strong left. He went on to create leftist popular support out of the masses of students to whom he gave university access. It is said today that in Algerian universities no matter the chosen field any given student will graduate with three degrees; one in the chosen field, the second in the French language because the Arabization program did not reach universities, and the third in political science. This is Boumediene's legacy; in Algerian universities politics are discussed as much as football. Everyone should have an opinion and everybody's opinion is extensively discussed and debated. The situation of Algerian student dorms in the 70s was very similar to the one described by McCauley & Moskalenko in their book "*Friction*".<sup>29</sup> In students' dorms Marxism was done and undone, capitalism demonized, and most important of all Algeria's true religious, linguistic, and ethnic identity was debated, night after night.

Students' mobilization was proceeding quickly and spreading to every corner of Algeria. The young generation had grown up amid stories and legends about the Algerian revolution against the evil invader, and they wanted their own revolution. However, this time the revolutionary energies found no external enemy to oppose but an internal one; the elitist minority that was enriching itself. This element had disastrous repercussions on the radicalization process because it led young Algerians to the notion that violence against the state was a legitimate means of reform. During the war of independence, the Algerian youth were absorbed and controlled by the FLN, but these young university students were politicized and used as militants without providing the necessary structures to absorb them later. As they graduated and ended in the streets without any hope of getting a decent job or housing, the politicization process that had turned them into militants would serve the ones

that came next to hire them as radicals.

Hundreds of zealous students joined farms as volunteers to work the land for a bright Algerian future. With their support and enthusiasm, Boumediene passed a law of seizure targeted towards large land owners. His administration also took over every aspect of the Algerian agricultural industry and plagued it with corruption and heavy bureaucracy. As a result, the agrarian revolution not only failed to turn Algeria into an agricultural producer but it also alienated most large land owners who believed they had the Islamic right to protect their property against the state assault.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, in 1974 the state took over the resale and trade of agricultural goods in an effort to cut out the middlemen, which further enhanced resentment from thousands of Algerians who were involved in this sector.

As the agrarian revolution failed and plunged Algeria into an eternal state of dependence on importation, the growing politicized student segment of Algerian society lost hope in a political solution and turned to a more radical discourse. To them the state had been compromised beyond hope of political amendment and needed purging. Once more, following the radicalization process described by McCauley & Moskalenko in Russia rather than the Middle East, Algerian youth faced a bitter reality.<sup>31</sup> As did the Russians before them, Algerians gradually moved away from pacifistic strategies (volunteering) and turned to a more aggressive approach.

#### **4. The post Boumediene era (1978-1992)**

In 1978 following Boumediene's death, Algeria's great socialist leader was replaced by a puppet that served the interests of a small faction of army officers known as "*Le Pouvoir*" (The Power). These were mainly secular, French-educated army officers. It became clear that the elite had taken over the state and were using the consolidation of power accumulated by Boumediene as well as the extensive interferences of the state in the marketplace to exploit the majority. Polarized, jobless *Arabisants* youth, alienated peasants and agriculture goods retailers and disenchanted, politicized, eternal students constituted a majority of Algerian society but were under the strict rule of a handful of army generals.

Following Boumediene's death Algeria inherited five main currents of opinion defined as the leftists, the *Arabisants*, the Berberists, the feminists and the Islamists.<sup>32</sup> Surprisingly, *Le Pouvoir*, despite being mainly composed of secular *Francisants*, found itself more comfortable with the *Arabisants* and the Islamists than with the Berberists or the feminists, and definitely not with the leftists. Indeed, a Kabyle separatist movement or a desire for

democracy as well as transparency or human rights were more repellent to *Le Pouvoir* than Islamic scriptural demands. The Islamists represented both the justification the army needed for muscular interventions and a counter power to the influential left that Boumediene created.

The regime was faced with a political impasse as the three agendas of the socialist revolution engendered by Boumediene had all failed: culturally via forced Arabization, agriculturally due to heavy bureaucracy and corruption, and industrially because Algeria was portrayed as an industrial country regardless of its lack of profitability. In fact, most companies over-hired employees to tackle unemployment and losses were concealed with oil money. But in order to abandon socialism the regime needed to defuse the influent leftist platform Boumediene created. Chadli's government relied on the Islamists to neutralize the leftists, the right, and the Berbers until it had secured its position. However, while the regime successfully tackled socialism it never offered a viable alternative. To fill this vacuum Algerian society manufactured one from what was available. As observed by Professor Bouroubi "*Every time an ideologist dies in Algeria, an Islamist is born.*"<sup>33</sup> With the decreasing influence of the Soviet Union and the aggression of Afghanistan (a fellow Muslim country), socialist activism was dying in Algeria and leaving room for religious activism.

After the Soviet-Afghan War two to three thousand Algerians returned from Afghanistan where they had prevented Soviet invasion.<sup>34</sup> During the war these individuals received military training and experience in combat but were also subject to a radical ideology. During Boumediene's presidency Algerians with similar attributes were often arrested, interrogated or held strictly under surveillance. But under Chadli, who desperately needed to end socialism, they were allowed full freedom. They were commonly referred to as "the Afghans" and found so much liberty as to name one of the mosques in Algiers *Kabul*, a sanctuary for the returned *Mujahidin*. In their mosques they were free to preach their own lectures of the Qur'an, a particularly severe lecture especially towards minorities and women. They grew confident, started praying in the streets and requested roads to be blocked during Friday prayers. They installed loud speakers on building roof tops, houses, and cars and diffused their messages even to those that did not attend the prayer.

By the time *Le Pouvoir* got rid of the competition and consolidated its political power, the only movement left that could seriously oppose it was the one it allowed to grow. The Islamist movement had by then not only grown in numbers but also in ambitions and proclaimed itself legitimate enough to use violence to assert its value system. Across Algeria brothels and bars were targeted in violent assaults, cinemas that projected western movies

were often vandalized, and women that were dressed inappropriately were harassed. Yet it was in universities, where three main ideologies co-existed, that animosity expressed itself most. The leftists, the Berberists and the Islamists all met in Algiers' universities. Clashes were frequent and the authorities never effectively intervened. The Islamists grew bolder and used force to prevent leftist and Amazigh meetings, violently suppressed speakers, and removed leftist posters.

Backed by the regime's silence and inactivity, the Islamist movement absorbed most currents of opinion except that of the Berberists and the feminists who then saw in the regime a counter-balance to the Islamists. By then *Le Pouvoir* only needed an excuse to intervene and suppress the Islamist movement it had fed, and either one of them would provide it. In November 1982, Kamel Amzel a leftist militant who happened to be Kabyle (Amazigh minority) was killed savagely by a sword (representing the weapon of his brave ancestors) at a university in Algiers as he was hanging left wing posters. This event was highly exploited by the regime and triggered a war against the Islamists. The regime engaged in waves of arrests and prosecutions, pushing the Islamists underground and away from the state's control. Arrests targeted the leaders and the elite of the movement, leaving masses of religious radicals without direction.

Despite being extremely popular and active underground in mosques, cafes, and bazaars the Islamist current remained incapable of mobilizing the masses towards the radical change it sought, simply because the oil and gas exports still generated enough financial resources to cover the socialist bankruptcy Algeria was heading towards. However, as oil prices collapsed in 1986, the state lost its only leverage over the masses. The polarized jobless *Arabisants* youth, the alienated peasants, the left and the right, and the Islamists all saw their life conditions sharply worsen and by 1988 massive demonstrations burst out all over the country. President Chadli Benjdid did what he is known to do best, he declared a state of emergency and handed executive power to General Khalad Nezzar to resolve the growing conflict. The army intervened, and ten thousand soldiers were deployed to Algiers with live ammunition. Accounts report hundreds of young enraged civilians killed in the following days. If one were to debate the Algerian ex foreign minister's insistence that the Algerian Black Decade was not a civil war but a war on terrorism, the events of October 1988 are the argument that it began as a civil war. On one side was *Le Pouvoir*, with live ammunition under General Nezzar's commands, and on the other alienated, disenchanting, polarized, jobless, and hopeless Algerians lacking leadership.

## **5. The Islamist current, the only current**

The disenchanted youth that emerged during October 1988's events could have been influenced or redirected towards any other type of radicalism (Communism or separatism for instance) to express their frustration, so why religious radicalism and not another? Why not the Western model? Europe's main capitals are less than three hours by plane from Algiers, so why the Islamist bias? In addition to the fact that the regime supported Islamism to counter other social currents in the same way that Wahhabism has been promoted to counter communism, there were four main influences that directed the Algerians towards religious radicalism and are specific to the Algerian context. These are the absence of any strong national alternative, Khomeini's stay in France, foreign media (French in particular) and finally the American TV show Dallas.

### **5-1. Absence of any serious national alternative discourse**

The Algerian elite were often discredited if they spoke French, were female, a Kabyle, or secular. These attributes set them apart from mainstream society. Elites associated with these characteristics had little influence over the masses. Those who were perceived as elite with suitable values were included in a program launched by Chadli's regime to counter-balance growing radical power. Sheikh Mohammed al-Ghazali, a moderate Islamic cleric and scholar, was promoted to head of the scientific council at the University of Emir Abdel Kader to promote his own version of Islam, a moderate Islam for a religious moderate elite. The Sheikh was also given a daily thirty minutes on a dedicated television channel to spread the message of a tolerant Islam. However, individuals at risk of being radicalized were either not interested in the broadcast or did not have access to the university, but his discourse and teachings were particularly appealing to a portion of the secular segment of society, turning them into potential recruits for the radicals. Indeed, this segment suffered from the same social difficulties and frustrations as others, difficulties that emanated from the regime's dysfunctions. Yet no official figure in Algeria criticized or discussed the regime's policies, except the radicals. As Sheikh Mohammed al-Ghazali turned secular youth into moderate Muslims, radicals effortlessly convinced them that only *Sharia* law could save the country.

Chadli's regime, with its concern for censorship, only tolerated one strictly controlled television channel, making it very weak. This single channel lacked any sense of authenticity and was nicknamed *El Yatima*, which translates to The Orphan. The meaning associated with this term is a little deeper than just being alone, it conveys a sense of being meaningless and

without hope. It was a channel that spoke to nobody except the regime. The press on the other hand could not reach those that needed their information most as by 1990 still 40 percent of the population could not read. Algerians turned to underground channels to be informed, such as flyers, speakers on cars and roof tops, and endless discussions in cafes or mosques. These channels were massively occupied by two forces - the declining socialists and the rising Islamists.

## **5-2. Khomeini's stay in France**

With the death of Boumediene in 1978 the Algerians lost their spiritual father, their Arabic language supporter, anti-imperialist, authoritarian and secular leader. Knowingly or not, France introduced them to a replacement. Via intensive and rather subjective media coverage, Khomeini was prepared and promoted by French media for his Iranian revolution, and collaterally seized the hearts of Algerians who found in him an ideological father figure similar to Boumediene. In the early 80s, an English teacher asked children in Algeria to write an essay about the country they admired most. Surprisingly, considering the Sunni-Shia tensions of today, 70 percent wrote about Iran.<sup>35</sup> Of course, Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution have played a central role in shaping most Arab societies. However, in the case of Algeria it was even more pronounced as French media were and still are extremely influential in the region.

Although Khomeini's stay in France did not last longer than 112 days, it is said that he gave about 132 meetings and interviews with the media, most of them French. The French press described him as a Muslim Gandhi, highlighting a sharp contrast with the extravagant Shah of Iran, the same extravagance Algerians associated with *Le Pouvoir*. Khomeini was given extensive coverage, one of the leading French television channels had a daily fifteen minutes dedicated to Iran and Khomeini. He was being compared to Pope Jean Paul II, and later the French media would describe his revolution as the 68 French revolution.<sup>36</sup>

The impact French media had on Algerian society was based on three key factors. First, urban Algerians spoke and read French and despite all attempts to 'Arabize' them, many embraced Arabization as a political stance but still favored the use of French. Second, France's geographical proximity allowed Algerians to receive French television and radio channels via simple, affordable satellite dishes. Finally, as described above, Algerian television programs could not compete in quality or freedom of speech with the industrial world, thus Algerians turned to French media. These three elements combined made France's prime time, Algerian's prime time. In discussions with Algerian professors who were

students in the late 70s and early 80s, it is with irony that they recall having Khomeini's posters proudly displayed in their university dorms.

### **5-3. Foreign and French media**

Today as in the early 80s, the foreign press, especially French, (in the Algerian context) excessively cover Islamist events in comparison with other religions or ideologies, as indicated by a recent Guardian article, “*Terror attacks by Muslims receive 357% more press attention, study finds.*”<sup>37</sup> Given how influential the French media were, several Algerian intellectuals vigorously criticized them because they tended to put the Islamists at the center of attention. Everything said by the Islamists was reported by French media and everything the French media reported was then analyzed and discussed by Algerians.

French newspaper headlines such as “*Abbassi Madani (FIS cofounder) frightens France...*” had severe impacts on a society that perceives the enemy of France as the most nationalist of them all. The French media may not have realized that the Algerian reader was not mature enough at the time to seize the irony of such articles. A journalist reported having been present the day that headline was printed. In a crowded urban district (Bab El Oued), masses gathered to listen to the interpretations given by one of the ‘brothers’ that could read French fluently. The ‘brother’ would explain how Ali Benhadj and Abbassi Madani would oppose France and the *Francisants* it left behind by saying “*Even they (the French) know that Abbassi Madani is going to give us our rights.*” He would scream “*Look they are afraid and they should be!*”<sup>38</sup>

### **5-4. Then there was Dallas**

Algeria played a central role in ending the Iranian hostage crisis, as a result, it is believed that the famous TV show Dallas, as well as several Hercules C130 (army transport planes), were generously sold to Algeria at competitive prices. In the case of Dallas, it was virtually free, with each episode leased for just 3,500 Algerian dinars (700 US dollars).<sup>39</sup>

As explained above the Algerian TV channel, *El Yatima*, was abandoned and had very little reach as its programs were never successful, except for Dallas. Algiers' streets were reported to be totally deserted during the broadcast of each episode of Dallas. Afterwards, as cafes and streets were crowded again, the only two topics discussed with fervor were Dallas and football (Algeria gained its first access to the World Cup final phase in 1982). Dallas had seized the whole Algerian society regardless of social classes; urban, rural, female, male, *Arabisant* or *Francisant*, all recognized themselves in the Ewing family; the patriarchal

family had several generations living under the same roof, a typical social feature of Algerian society. The absence of the state and its institutions as well as the central role of oil in creating wealth mirrored Algerian realities. J.R.'s machismo fitted perfectly to Algerian machismo, Pamela and Sue Ellen's hair style and dresses among others became musts to the Algerian urban class. So, why not the Western model?

First, because the Algerians' relationship with Dallas was a painful and frustrating one summarized very well by the journalist Mouny Berrah "... *Me, who has no running water, when I see a swimming pool (in Dallas) I suffer (...) Elsewhere, Dallas represents excess, in Algeria it represents penury...*"<sup>40</sup> It is with frustration that Algerian society watches Dallas. Algeria saw its demographic double in less than twenty years, a country in which the majority lived without sewers or running water with an average of eight to ten people per household.<sup>41</sup>

Second, to hold the interest of the viewers, the screen writers accumulated stories of betrayal, illegitimate children, adultery, and manipulations based on sex and money which were insupportable to a Muslim audience. The public that first identified itself with the characters of Dallas then became afraid to be portrayed as one of them, to be associated with alcoholism and adultery. The painful and frustrating relationship evolved to become disgust for a society that functioned on low impulses and betrayal. As expressed by a sociology professor "*To us (the Algerians) the price was too high, if the Western model required from us to prostitute our daughters and wives... we will oppose it.*"<sup>42</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Frustrated students, polarized *Arabisant*, alienated farmers and retailers, as well as singled out minorities clashed against one another during the era of Boumediene before progressively turning against Chadli's regime. Among all the forces that opposed one another, two stood out, socialism backed by the state and the popular Islamism. The socialist cause could survive only via intensive political support and more importantly financial support, which ended when oil prices collapsed in 1986. To the vast majority of Algerians, the equation was simple - Boumediene was gone, socialism was gone. Khomeini, who had been inspiring long enough to turn passionate socialist students into passionate religious students, quickly became defined as an enemy of Sunni Islam. Thus, Khomeini too was gone, and finally the Western lifestyle portrayed by Dallas appeared disgusting to Muslim society. If not for the drastic deterioration of the economic situation that occurred in 1986, Algerian

society could have pursued its quest for social identity in a slow and relatively peaceful manner. However, two years after the oil crash, conditions did not allow for a slow process. Drastic economic measures undertaken by the regime forced Algerians to request immediate change. Since the revolutionary FLN, socialism, nationalism, capitalism and *Khomeinism* had failed, Algerians looked to their own past for answers and found the glorious and appealing era of the *Khilafa* now incarnated by the FIS cofounders Abbassi Madani and Ali Benhadj.

Recommender: Masanori Naito  
Professor, Graduate School of Global Studies, Doshisha University

## Notes

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