

MERIA

Algeria's Terrifying But Unsurprising Agony

By Rami G. Khouri*

The sudden increase in the slaughter of Algerian villagers by the thousands over the past several weeks requires that we try to understand the causes of the madness taking place in that country with something deeper than perplexed finger pointing at Islamist rebels, freelance thugs, and/or government agents. Some of the causes are deeper, and older, and cannot be dismissed by those who prefer to ignore the past and explain Arab violence mainly by racist and half-baked theories of religious or cultural tendencies.

We do not even know how many people have died in the last five years -- estimates of the dead range from 80,000 to over 120,000. However sad, Algeria today may be the logical, violent consequence of a land and people whose modern experience has been defined by a cumulative series of severe, almost cataclysmic, political disappointments and national denials. Algeria may be an extreme microcosm of the Arab World's harsh encounter with the five primary and consecutive forces of the modern global experience: European colonialism, sudden statehood with power centrally and non-accountably held in the hands of a small elite, the use of violence on a wide scale by the state and its opponents, the failure of national sovereignty to provide the majority of its citizens with either economic security or a sense of political wellbeing or participation, and a last resort but unsuccessful resort to religion for elusive relief.

During over 130 years of French colonial occupation and annexation, Algerians suffered foreign domination and economic exploitation along with the added ignominy of being subjected to a mass experiment in national and social engineering -- the attempted transformation of Algerians into Frenchmen and women after Algeria became an integral part of France in 1848. Algerian nationalist

movements started working for liberation soon after World War One, and over one million Algerians died in the war of liberation in 1954-1962.

The promise of independence provided real benefits to the Algerian people in the 1960s, in self-respect and real economic progress. But Algeria was also a paradigm of much of the modern Arab world, with economic, political and military power almost totally held in the hands of a small group of politicians, military men, and technocrats who ran the state like a private club. The joy of liberation in 1962 was followed three years later by the bloodless coup led by Houari Boumedienne. His nationalization of French oil and gas interests symbolized Algeria's economic self-assertion and sovereignty; but his government's autocratic ways ensured that economic expansion would not be sustainable, and that corruption, inefficiency, waste, and favoritism would remain the order of the day.

Algeria was the pride of the Arab World in other ways -- as a spokesman for the call for a New International Economic Order, a leading player in OPEC's attempt to achieve equity in North-South economic terms of reference, a mediator in hostage situations in Iran and Lebanon, and a major contributor to the quest for a meaningful Euro-Arab Dialogue.

The burdensome weight of the past proved very heavy by the late-1980s. The population of Algeria was very young -- about seventy percent under the age of thirty -- and unemployment among young males reached well over fifty percent in most cities and large towns. Economic prospects were grim; repayments on \$25 billion of foreign debt took up over 83 percent of export earnings every year. The combination of economic stagnation, declining standards of living, and a political leadership that tolerated no dissent sparked widespread street riots and many deaths in Algerian cities in October 1988. The political leadership headed by Chazli Benjedid was forced to institute widespread constitutional reforms in February 1989, which paved the way for the establishment of the Islamic Salvation Front (better known by its French acronym, FIS).

The June 1990 local elections for 1539 municipal councils and 48 provincial assemblies -- after 28 years of single party rule by the National Liberation Front (FLN in its French acronym) -- ended in stunning results: the FLN was soundly rejected, winning just 28 percent of the vote, while the FIS took an absolute majority of 54 percent. The next elections, for the national parliament, were held in December 1991, after the state brazenly fixed the election districts to help its candidates, applied martial law, and locked up hundreds of FIS leaders. The FIS again thrashed the FLN, winning 188 of the 231 seats that were decided during the first round. The FIS needed just 28 more seats for a majority in the 430-seat parliament, which it would have won easily on the second round of voting scheduled for January 16, 1992 -- but that round never took place.

The old guard panicked, turned again to the armed forces, brought the Algerian transition to democracy to a halt, locked up over five thousand FIS activists and their key leaders, and declared another state of

emergency in early 1992. A five-man higher state council was named to run the country in January 1992, but its head, Mohammad Boudiaf, was assassinated six months later. The council was replaced by an appointed president, former defense minister Liamine Zeroual, in January 1994, and his attempts to resolve Algeria's problems through dialogue and harsh force have not worked.

The vast majority of Algerians suffer an unenviable situation that is also becoming common in some other Arab and African lands. They experienced a cruel transition from a long modern legacy of colonial rule to an often incompetent and intolerant indigenous autocracy. They now endure a terrible combination of frail economy, widespread poverty and unemployment, rising pressures on family incomes, political violence by both the state and the opposition, and a government services system that offers erratic quality care to only some of its citizens. And when, nearly in desperation, they turned to their religion -- their loving God -- for comfort, protection and hope, they woke up one day to find that their state had outlawed their God as a political force.

In the past century and a half, many or perhaps most Algerians have had their past taken away from them by colonial rule, their present wellbeing weakened by the excesses of a centralized and intolerant state, their religious and political identity curtailed by the unilateral decisions of non-accountable elites, and their future hopes and expectations mortgaged to the madness of current violence by groups that are widely condemned, but never fully identified.

I cannot think of any other people in the world who have suffered the same consecutive series of violent struggles, heightened expectations, recurring disappointments, identity curtailments, and dashed hopes as have been experienced by the Algerian people since the early 19th century. The price of the twin and consecutive scourges of colonialism and

indigenous autocracy is steep indeed, and payable in ghastly currencies that include the integrity of society, the blood of innocent civilians, and a chronic sense of despair for the future. The main problem in Algeria is not that violence against civilians occurs at its current gruesome rate, but that violence against Algerians has been continuing virtually nonstop for the past century and a half -- in various forms, by various hands, for various reasons, but with a single common consequence that is the madness we witness today. Ugly and terrible, yes. Surprising or unusual, no.

**Rami G. Khouri is an Amman, Jordan-based international columnist and a writer for the Jordan Times.*