INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Mr. Peter B. Martin
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Dear Peter:

I went to Algeria knowing things would be tough, but after talking to Algerians in France I started thinking I had purchased a ticket to hell. They called it a new Beirut and some said they themselves were afraid to go home. "Don't you know they EAT people like you, " said one Algerian, half-jokingly. I dismissed the inauspicious comments, but the mood at Orly didn't seem much brighter.

An Algerian woman waiting at the check-in desk asked with surprise if I was going into "a situation like that" on my own. When I replied in the affirmative she warned me not to talk with anyone on the airplane or in the waiting room. "You don't know who they are or what they want," she said. In the waiting room all was silent. No one smiled. Most people chose to sit at least one seat away from their neighbor, more if possible. The few people who spoke conversed little and in hushed tones. A group of French security guards strolled around the room trying to make conversation. They didn't seem to have much luck.

The flight was similar, with the mood going from glum to morose. I was just beginning to have serious doubts when the northern coast of Africa came into sight. As the frown on the face of the man sitting across from me deepened, we edged down toward the lush green of the Algerian mountains and the deep blue of the Mediterranean. "Hell" couldn't have looked better.

Security at the airport seemed only slightly tighter than that I'd seen in Cairo several months earlier. It wasn't tight at all considering the situation in the country, which has been

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coined a "low-intensity civil war" by Western diplomats. The only thing the customs official asked me about was the Qor'an I'd brought with me. He asked gruffly if I was a Muslim. Strange, I thought, in a Muslim country. But when I responded in the negative he waved me by. I'd expected the worst and it seemed I'd arrived in paradise.

Within moments of leaving the airport I was cruising through the impressive Algerian landscape to the undulating rhythms of the Rai music I'd already heard played in New York, Cairo and Paris. Far from the hellish milieu I'd been prepared for, I found instead a city in which, aside from the curfew and roadblocks and bag searches at the doors of public buildings, life seemed to be going on as normal, surprising given the daily reports of how many policemen and alleged terrorists had been killed the previous day. Restaurants still do a brisk business. Office hours are as usual. There are even two discos which remain open, although clients are forbidden to leave until the curfew is lifted at 5:30 a.m.

Despite the "tenuous situation," as residents vaguely refer to the current struggle to find the best possible synthesis of the French culture imposed on them during the colonial era and their own Muslim roots, the country has a definite appeal. It has a dynamism -- a will for change and a commitment to work for it -- that had previously thought impossible. Algerians are determined to create a modern and authentic Algerian state, although they disagree bitterly about what those terms mean. The debate about possible solutions is heated and healthy. It is discussed in every cafe and at every dinner table.

In my initial fascination with Algeria I kept wondering why the Algeria I was seeing was so utterly different from that which I'd been told about. It has taken time to understand why everyone on my flight in was silent.

The pressures and difficulties of life in Algeria come upon one slowly, quietly. They are unspoken and beneath the surface. But they are there. There have been days when my frustration was so deep I couldn't stop the tears from flooding down my cheeks. There have been nights of insomnia as I saw the police and military cars prowl the deserted streets from 10:30 p.m. to 5:30 a.m. and was awakened by gunshots in the night. Like the Algerians on the flight into the country, I find I have become more conservative about what I say and to whom. I do not jump to conclusions, so much as ease toward them haltingly.

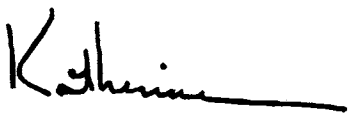
Two weeks ago I went to the local grocer and asked for coffee. None. Sugar. None. Tea. None. "In principle we have all those things but there don't happen to be any now. Try again

later," said the man with a sad smile. I tried in numerous shops in different areas of the capital for over a week before I finally found coffee again. Now I have begun buying in larger quantities, as do Algerians, just in case. I'm learning to live without some of the things I once thought of as basic and the things I used to take for granted, like close friendships and confidences, have become infinitely more meaningful.

Algeria is a country of intense extremes and contradictions. It is sleek and it is poor. It is perhaps the most Westernized and deeply traditional of Arab countries. In the evening four out of six available TV channels show French porn. In the day the women one sees in the streets generally wear dresses to their toes. Many women don't go out at all. It is a difficult country but I know I am privileged to be witnessing this pivotal time in its history. I can't imagine anywhere I'd rather be.

It's going to be an interesting couple years.

Best regards,



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