

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Peter Bird Martin
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USA**OUT OF ALGERIA**

Dear Peter,

Last night I was struck by a sudden and gripping fear. This time the fear hit me while I was walking through the Gare du Nord station on my way to an African restaurant in the north Paris district known as Barbès. The area is a sort of Parisian slum, and most of its inhabitants are Algerians and other Africans and Arabs from former French colonies. The crime rate is higher than elsewhere in the city, as is the tension.

It is a neighborhood I know well, however, and my visit there should not have been a big deal.

But suddenly I was pale with fear. "I don't know if going to this neighborhood is a good idea. I really don't feel safe," I told the Arab friend with whom I was walking. He didn't think much of my comment and we headed on. "I'm serious," I said, "I want to go to this restaurant, but I need you to watch out for me. I don't feel safe and I don't trust the people around us. Stand close to me and keep your eyes open for danger." I was trembling. My friend wanted to make a call from the station, but after a few minutes in line at a telephone booth I insisted we continue to our destination and call from there. I couldn't stand being in a public and open area any longer. My childlike anxiety and feeling of complete vulnerability were testimony to the war next door.

"I've never seen you like this before," my friend told me in surprise. "You told me in letter what things were like in Algeria, but somehow I didn't fully understand what you meant. The words were not enough to explain what I now see you experiencing," he said.

Words. There were days when I felt like crying because I wanted to talk so badly and couldn't. It wasn't worth the risk of being visited by the police (which I was), or the militant Islamists (who may have been the people trying my door one

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fearful night at curfew). The feeling of having to weigh and weigh again what I say and to whom. Can I say this over the phone? Maybe I can write it in a letter if I leave off my return address, just in case it gets into the wrong hands.

The silence with regard to Algeria is deafening. When I call Algeria I recognize the coded phrases and I know the situation continues to deteriorate.

"How are things in Algeria?" I ask a friend on the phone.

"You know more about it there than we do here," he responds.

"I'm not sure. There's hardly anything in the press about the crisis," I say.

"Remember how Algeria was paradise last month?" he asks.

"Yes," I respond with a sad smile.

"Well, paradise is getting even better fast," he says. "I can't wait to see you."

It is still hard to believe that I can talk freely about my experiences in Algeria over the phone or in public, and I find writing this first "Out of Algeria" newsletter difficult. Is it really safe to say?

How can things be so different in France, a country where many of the Arabs I see around me have experienced what I have and more? How can things be much safer in a city where so much looks the same?

My Algerian friends on Islamic hitlists remain in hiding even here in Paris. They know the false security of borders in a war which, though basically internal, is becoming increasingly international in scope.

I can't help thinking that if the West had seen and felt what I have lived these past eight months they would know they cannot afford to ignore Algeria. Algeria may be politically independent, but it is not really separate from France.

Everywhere I go in Paris I hear Arabic spoken and even people who look French often break into Arabic when I drop a "maalesh" [oh well] or a "shukran" [thank you] into my conversation. If I didn't speak French I could get along quite easily here in Arabic. Plenty of my friends do.

On Friday afternoons in Barbes, the rue Polonceau is so crowded with praying Muslims, many of them Algerian, that cars cannot get by.

There is a cornucopia of goods for sale here -- videotapes and cassettes of Islamist clerics, Afghan hats and traditional Arab robes and turbans. If one looks hard enough, one can even find "Islam is the Solution" T-Shirts, now banned in Algeria.

There are two Arabic radio stations here and local Arab papers are widely available. There are at least as many Algerian films playing in the French capital than in Algiers and El-Mudjahid, the official Algerian French-language daily, is available at virtually all newsstands.

But all is not calm in an area that at first glance resembles a bustling Third World souk. The faithful are watched like hawks by French and perhaps Algerian security agents with walkie-talkies and cameras, and police trucks are never far away.

Paris is one of the primary centers for Islamic activities determined to overthrow Algeria's repressive military-dominated government.

The Algerian Brotherhood in France, an organization charged with writing and distributing clandestine Islamic leaflets throughout Algiers, is based in the neighborhood. Its leaders, released from a French prison only days ago, are under heavy surveillance.

The imam at the mosque around the corner is Abdelbaki Sahraoui. In the gritty Algiers district of Kouba in March 1989, he announced the creation of the Islamic Salvation Front [FIS], the militant group that was banned after it swept the North African nation's first free parliamentary elections almost two years ago and has been fighting the regime ever since.

Eighty-eight Algerians were rounded up in Barbes two weeks ago in government raids on the community which zeroed on 65 homes and 11 Islamic organizations suspected of involvement with the FIS.

Authorities carted off hundreds of documents, false identity papers, large sums of money, several weapons and other evidence linking Islamist activists in France to Algeria's outlawed FIS during the crackdown and the police presence in the neighborhood has remained strong. The French government said the dragnet was aimed to prevent potential acts of violence on French soil, but critics said they fear that in

acting so heavy handedly, France was laying itself open to reprisals by the groups, both at home and abroad.

"This [raid] may seem worrying, but one must remember that the neutrality demanded of France by the friends of Islam would in fact be a sign of support for the," the left-wing French Liberation newspaper commented.

The mood in Arab parts of Paris has been tense since the controversial crackdown, and residents say they feel uncomfortable about the tough security measures France's new conservative government has imposed.

"It's not safe to go out without your ID," said one Barbes resident. "There are police everywhere; you never when when they'll check your papers."

The government headed by Prime Minister Édouard Balladur was elected largely on a law-and-order platform after voters complained that the Socialists previously in power had been too soft on immigration. With France pledging its all-out support to the beleaguered regime in Algeria, Interior Minister Charles Pasqua has enthusiastically cracked down on suspected FIS supporters.

"The government will not tolerate certain people using the guise of religion to attack French interests or some founding principles of our republic and our tradition of integration," Pasqua told journalists several weeks ago.

The pressure being applied to emigre foes of the Algiers regime angers Rabah Kebir, a FIS leader in exile in Germany.

"France is getting almost as repressive as Algeria these days," he said in an interview this week. "The majority of Algerians voted for the FIS in a free fair election. We represent the Algerian people, but so-called democracies don't seem to want to talk to us. Where are the democratic principles here?"

France's response to the Algerian crisis is puzzling, considering the deep links between the two lands.

Algeria was a territory of France for 132 years and anyone born in Algeria before 1962 was born in France. Nearly every Algerian has relatives in France and here in France there are plenty of *Pieds-Noirs*, Frenchmen raised in the sunny land of vineyards that was once southern France -- Algeria. Well over 20,000 ethnic Algerians, some of them Islamists, have dual nationality with France and millions more have never held anything but a French passport.

Between foreign aid and commercial projects, France has billions of dollars invested in Algeria.

After first keeping quiet in the annulment of the election almost two years ago, France seems to have accepted the Algiers regime's attempt to paint the struggle there as one between fearsome fundamentalists and moderate secularists.

Redha Malek, the provisional head of state, told French television recently that if Algeria goes Islamist, the rest of North Africa, including Egypt, will probably follow suit. Many Western diplomats are skeptical of Malek's domino theory but agree that the Algerian outcome will strongly influence events in neighboring states.

"We're concerned about the spin-off effect and the possibility of increased turmoil in the region," said one Western diplomat. "Algeria matters a lot."

The zealous Pasqua has refused to grant asylum to to FIS members, even if they have had no direct involvement in violent activities. Many Algerians who were registered FIS members are being persecuted in their own country for belonging to what was, until recently, a legal political party.

The FIS has accused the French of unfair treatment with regard to French visas and passports and has said anti-FIS members of Algeria's French-speaking elite are being preferential treatment.

A defense source told Reuters that the French military is quietly helping train an elite Algerian anti-terrorist unit.

France and the United States have differing views of the crisis. Their approaches have been characterized as "parallel but different," but privately diplomats on both sides have expressed concern that as the situation worsens, the two countries may end up with conflicting policies with regard to the Islamist question.

The satirical journal of French politics Canard Enchaîné has angrily pointed out Washington's seeming indifference with regard to the Franco-Algerian problem.

"In private representatives of the State Department are being unusually brutal. The Canard sums up their mistrustful diatribes: "The Algerian leaders are no better than their adversaries in the FIS. We have nothing to do with these people. It's up to the French to take care of things but they are paralyzed. All we care about is the risk that Islamist disease will spread to Morocco and Egypt."

Washington has encouraged dialogue and has criticized the Algerian government's well-documented human rights abuses in cracking down on Islamists. There are few US investments in Algeria and only about 500 Americans there.

The FIS, which has refused to negotiate with the Algerian regime, has expressed interest in explaining its side of things to the West. Kebir took strong exception to the view of the FIS as a destructive force:

"We have stated time and again that the Islamic state we will create in Algeria will be neither a Saudi Arabia nor an Iran. Our model is the life of the Prophet Mohamed, and the most important values for us are justice and equal rights.

"We are much more like Western societies than communism was. We believe people have the right to choose their own leaders, whereas communism and the so-called Muslim Arab governments have showed that they don't agree with that. We could easily live in harmony with the West, and there is no need to be afraid of us."

The nattily dressed, clean shaven Kebir added: "We Muslims know that in today's world we need televisions, computers and airplanes. Many FIS supporters are teachers and scientists. We're not trying to return to the Middle Ages,...and we're not going to live in the desert with camels."

But with the West largely standing away from the Islamists and France working against them, animosity has increased sharply.

Eleven foreigners have been killed in Algeria, allegedly by Islamists, in the past three months. Bruno Etienne, a French expert on Islam, has accused Paris of meddling in Algerian affairs and has said the wave of arrests in Paris will not halt the violence.

The Algerian regime, which has been ruling the country by force since early 1992, when it refused to accept the results of the December 1991 election, banned the FIS and jailed top FIS leaders, is scheduled to step down December 31. But with the FIS refusing to join in any dialogue, this seems highly unlikely. There is no other opposition party, Islamic or secular, with a wide enough support base to offer a viable alternative to the two antagonistic forces.

Analysts expect the government to postpone its stepping down as long as possible and say it is likely that the military will eventually take direct control of the country and increase repression against the Islamists, who are likely to augment the firepower on their side as well.

For those still in Algeria, the fear continues to mount, as does the frustration. With no peaceful end in sight the silence grows louder both inside and outside the country. My friend's comment over the phone still rings in my ears.

"Paradise is getting even better fast."

Best regards,


Katherine