

"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

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Katherine Roth
Paris, France

3 December, 1993

Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755
USA



The writing on the wall -- Graffiti in downtown Algiers reading "no hope"

Dear Peter,

When gunshots were heard outside Frere Hamdia High School the already-weary French teacher knew getting through the morning lesson on expository essays would be an uphill battle. She also knew she was on the front line of what some have called an intellectual independence movement, and a lot more was at stake than French grammar.

"This is the last chance we've got to intellectually equip our citizens and future

Katherine Roth is a Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs
writing about tradition and modernity in the Arab world

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

decision-makers, and many of the older boys in the class are already involved in the fighting. They're surrounded by terrorism and hopelessness and if they don't get a sense of rationalism here, they may not get it at all," she said.

She should know. She grew up in the shadow of this overcrowded high school in the heart of Kouba, one of the grittiest and most Islamist-dominated neighborhoods of Algiers. This is the neighborhood where Abdelbaki Sahraoui, now in exile and serving as an imam in Paris, first announced the creation of the Islamic Salvation Front in March of 1989. The French teacher said most of her students and colleagues favor an Islamic state and that many are actively involved in the struggle against the military regime which has been running the country since 1991, when the final round of the nation's first free elections were cancelled to keep the FIS from winning by a landslide.

With some 75 percent of Algerians under the age of 30, high schools like Frere Hamdia are representative of the society as a whole.

Like most people in her neighborhood, this Algerian teacher knows what it is to be devoted to the Islamic solution, but unlike many others, she also knows the taste of disillusionment.

"It took me two years to figure out that the Islamic solution was not for me. The turning point came when one of the leading sheikhs said women's brains were smaller than men's brains. That was the final straw for me. But it isn't easy to go against the tide. There's a lot of social pressure to stay in, and many of them don't realize that they can be good Muslim's without joining the FIS," she said. "They need all the intellectual firepower they can get."

Because 88 percent of the students fail the Baccalaureate exam (given the final year of high school) and so cannot enter college or find good jobs, many end up as *hittistes* [from *hitt*, the Arabic word for wall], a local term for the masses of young men who spend what should be the most productive years of their lives leaning against the crumbling walls of the city because they have neither jobs nor apartments of their own to go to. They are single because they do not have the money to get married and they have little hope of finding either housing, employment, or spouses. Some of these young men go through high school second or third times trying to pass the Bac, and many end up joining militant Islamic groups or, because it is the only available job, the police force.

On October 6, when I visited Frere Hamdia High School, the mood was grim and morale was rock bottom. I had to manoeuvre past a tank to get in the front door. It was the morning after the anniversary of the 1988 riots that started the country's rapid liberalization process which ended abruptly with a coup d'etat, the annulment of the elections and the imprisonment and torture of thousands of FIS members. This year neighborhood youths, some of them high school age, commemorated the October 5 anniversary by passing out candles at the mosque, firing rounds from a passing ambulance, and assassinating one of the high school philosophy teachers.

"After 1988 [the philosophy teacher] really believed this was a democracy. He talked too much," explained one of his colleagues, who had witnessed the shooting. "We kept telling him to keep quiet about his views but he insisted that he had had most of the kids in the neighborhood as students and that they would never dare kill their teacher. How do I know they won't be waiting for me the next time?"

Although several of the teachers told me they suspected high school students were to blame for the shooting of their colleague the previous night, the morning French class for seniors was held at its usual hour.

"A rationalist is someone who works with their intellect. They find evidence and proof to come to a conclusion," the teacher told the class. Her voice was barely audible above the din of her 40 some students. "We're all disturbed by the problems last night, but we must finish this text and move on to the next chapter," she continued.

Gunshots were heard as a policeman outside the school was fired upon, but the class forged ahead. It was a typical day.

"Sometimes I get so depressed about things it takes extra effort to come to class and, once here, it takes extra effort to keep the class focussed on the lessons. But they

must concentrate. It's the only way to get the country back on track," the teacher said. But although she represents an important minority of teachers at the high school, she hardly represents the whole.

Frere Hamdia High School, like similar institutions throughout the country, reflects the deep divisions which have eaten away at the core of Algerian society and left it in a shambles of bitterness and mistrust.

The faculty is sharply divided between those who have been educated in French and have a Western outlook, and those who have been educated in Arabic and are more influenced by Muslim Arab thought. Most women teachers at the school are veiled, as are many of the girl students, and, until they were banned from doing so, most male teachers donned beards and traditional Arab garb. There is very little communication between the two groups, each of which see the other as a serious threat to the country's well-being.

Classes likewise segregate themselves by gender and, often, by ideology, and refuse any encouragement to mix. With five hours of Islamic science per week required at the school, many of the students also try to pressure their teachers into adopting Islamic dress and morals.

All sides agree that part of what has divided the society in two is the system itself. Although the installation of an Arabic language education and the adoption of the national motto "Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language, Algeria is my country" may have seemed like a good way to combat the French colonial influence when the country won its independence in 1962, the project has given way to a situation where many of those over 30 literally do not speak the same language as the majority of the country, who have been raised on Arabic and mandatory Islamic science.

Because government offices and larger businesses are largely run in French, recent graduates who have not had the means to visit France or pay a private French tutor have little hope of getting good jobs.

So where does this Arabized and mostly unemployed youth go? Many head for the one of the only two career paths open to non-French speakers: teaching or religion.

As part of the Arabization process mosques were, until recently, built at an astounding rate of 200 per year, according to Algerian journalist and author Aissa Khelladi. There are currently an estimated 11,000 mosques in Algeria, about 9,000 of which were built since independence. These mosques provide employment for the growing number of Algerian imams, which has jumped from 1,200 in 1965 to the present estimate of about 10,000.

Those who have recently graduated or are still in school seem to feel little affinity for the francophone establishment to which they have been denied entry, and the violence now rampant and on the increase in Algeria is a tangible symptom of the frustration and desperation felt by a majority of Algerians, who find their futures torn out from under them by the very leaders who fought for independence on a platform of Arabization and declared the country and officially declared Algeria an Islamic nation over thirty years ago.

Madi Moustapha, a sociologist at the prestigious Algerian CREAD think-tank, estimates that one fifth of those now serving time in Algerian prison camps are Arabic-speaking teachers. He calls the phenomenon linguistic violence. This angry violence and the fear it engenders runs deep and has become a part of many Algerians.

After spending nearly a year in the country, much of this fear has also become a part of me. Like the thousands of other foreigners and Algerian nationals who have fled the violence in Algeria in recent weeks, I now realize that although I am now out of Algeria, Algeria is not yet out of me.

In Algeria I didn't feel ready to risk the vulnerability that comes with sleep, and I often couldn't get to sleep until I was comforted by sunlight and the knowledge that curfew had once again been lifted. My first few nights out of Algeria the insomnia still persisted and a hard wind at the door was enough to make me jump from my chair.

Now in France, my nerves are soothed but the fear still returns from time to time. This is the first time I have understood the psychological scars of war.

Phones and faxes in Algeria are monitored, as is the mail, and life there taught me the value of words and their danger. When Parisians cautiously ask me what Algiers is really like, and they often do, the images run so deep they jam together and refuse all coherent expression. These images have become a part of me, but the words come slowly and with difficulty.

I have learned there is no clean line between the Arab world and the West and I am all too aware that the violent world I left behind me is less than an hour's flight from France and nearer to Paris than many European capitals, both geographically and politically. The leaders of the Islamist groups who have killed countless Algerian intellectuals and government forces are mostly based in Europe and the government which has its citizens running scared in the name of crushing the Islamist movement is doing so with Western support.

My eight months in Algeria were more tumultuous - and revealing - than I could have imagined prior to beginning my journey in March. My goal was to better understand the Islamist trend. What I found was a popular revolution and a society spiralling into a cycle of decay and mistrust.

To the untrained eye, Algiers is quiet and calm. Aside from the frequent roadblocks and the curfew, traditional images of battle are largely absent in much of the city and it would be possible to stay for a few days and not know there was any armed struggle at all. The foreign press is unavailable and the local press is heavily restricted, so those living in Algiers don't read or hear much news about the situation. Beneath the surface, however, the country is on the boil.

The situation has changed dramatically since my arrival. What was referred to as a "low intensity civil conflict" several months ago, is now openly called war. People who were in Algiers during the war of independence agree that, in terms of violence and destruction, the current state of affairs tops all but the final year of the revolution. The first Algerian intellectual was shot barely a week after my arrival in Algiers, whereas now such killings occur almost daily. Whereas the police were still handling the crisis when I arrived in March, the military is now visibly in charge. The process of taking the city neighborhood by neighborhood and checking every residence for arms, clandestine documents and wanted men continues, although many Algerians are just as frightened of the authorities' heavy-handed means as they are of militant Islamists. Military trucks travel in small convoys throughout the city at all times and there are widespread reports that napalm has been used on Islamist military camps in the area south of Algiers popularly known as Barbaristan.

When I first arrived policemen were being killed by ones and twos, whereas now battles last days and claim tens of lives. It's impossible to say how many people have died in the struggle in the past eight months, but some estimates have the death toll at about the 2,000 mark. Several Western diplomats have estimated the death toll at about 35 dead per day.

The military, the glue that is holding the country together, is increasingly giving way to mutinies and one general said he no longer trusts troops under 30, because they are apt to take their weapons and joining the Islamist side. Families are likewise breaking apart as they become polarized by the struggle between European and Islamic systems of thought. The middle ground between ideological camps is rapidly fading as the cycle of repression and violence becomes more pronounced.

In these few months, I watched the Algerian social fabric tear and unravel. Families that seemed solid in April and May have now come apart under the unbearable stress of mistrust and fear and the deeply ideological dilemma that, it seems, can no longer be worked out peacefully.

One middle class Algerian family I know has three sons. I went for an evening tea at their house [the strongly enforced 10:30 curfew didn't allow time for a full meal] one evening in March. Like nearly every Algerian family, some of its members favor an Islamic state and some adamantly do not.

"Of course we're *integristes* [the French word for fundamentalist]. We want to integrate modernity and Islamic tradition," the father of the family, an accountant,

proudly told me. His veiled wife and sister-in-law expressed their full support and began telling me how much "the brothers" [the common term for Islamists] had done to improve the capital.

"They got together to tutor math in the mosque and before the school year they painted the schools. They did all kind of things to help," said his wife. "Islam means faith and sharing and helping one another," explained the eldest son, 30, who, along with his father and younger brother, 29, donned traditional garb and strongly favored an Islamic state.

The youngest of the three brothers, 26, was the black sheep of the family. Whereas the rest of the family abhorred music as "forbidden," he listened to rock music and dressed much like any Western youth. "I'm not a fundamentalist," he said. "But that doesn't mean I'm not Muslim. Everyone has the right to choose his own path."

The tolerance I saw in this family was stunning, and the utopian scene reminded me of the sixties. Peace, love, joy and sharing. If all Islamists were like this family, the West would certainly have nothing to fear from Islam, and Islam would have nothing to fear from the West.

Now their house is quiet and the proudly *integrist* father and two sons have been forced to shave and adopt Western dress. The youngest brother joined the military and has become more firm in his stance against an Islamic state. The middle brother went to Europe for a 10-day holiday in August and never came back. His family doesn't know where he is, but he may well have joined the Islamic ranks now based overseas. The eldest brother, who lived at home with his wife and baby, hardly comes to the house anymore. His wife, who wears Iranian style clothing instead of the traditional Algerian veil and comes from a militant Islamist family, left the house with the baby in September, saying her parents-in-law were too middle-of-the-road for her. When the family gets together, they now are careful with their words and they have begun to mistrust each other.

They have strongly conflicting ideas about what kind of country they want their children to grow up in and as the battle for and against an Islamic state becomes hotter, ideological persuasion is proving stronger than family ties. Inter-familial arrests and assassinations have become commonplace and for this family as for many others, home is now more a mine field than a sanctuary.

It is impossible to live in Algiers and not be touched by the situation. First I learned to adjust to the strictly enforced curfew, the sound of gunshots in the night and being closely examined at roadblocks throughout the city.

Early in April a friend knocked at my door. He had tears in eyes. It was the first time I had seen him without a *kamis*, the long cotton gown traditionally worn by North African Arabs. He had come to tell me times had changed in the city and that this was the last time I would see him with a beard. He had heard from friends that the military was to begin registering all those with beards that afternoon and was on his way to the barber with the rest of his family to shave.

"Is this a democracy?" he asked me. "My beard means something to me. It means I love my God. Does the American government force people to shave and tell them what to wear?"

I couldn't come up with a good response, but I began to share the anger felt by so many of the Algerians around me. What were their rights? Where was democracy when the majority of the country voted for an Islamic state and were robbed of their choice? Who could trust Western governments who pushed democracy then supported its suppression? My friend had lost credibility in the democratic system and in this case I could find few arguments in its defense.

Two days later I saw police trucks round up bearded men on the street. I talked to several of these men, who said their names had had been registered, their *kamis*es destroyed and their beards shaved. The people I talked to had done nothing wrong. Two were grocers and one a student.

I had once felt safe around those dressed like "brothers," since they never harassed me in the street and their moral convictions gave me a sense of trust, but beards soon began to take on a new meaning for me. Bearded men in better neighborhoods were now as likely to be undercover policemen as Islamists, and I now

knew that many of the people who looked clean-shaven and wore European clothing were quite likely Islamists.

My first run in with the authorities came not long after. Several Islamist friends came over to my apartment for tea. About twenty minutes after they sat down, the doorbell rang. Two plainclothes policemen walked in and asked for identification from everyone in the room, then they took those with beards to the station. A friend who asked the lieutenant at the local police station about the incident was told that my phone was listened to and that I was under surveillance. An Algerian journalist friend of mine took the incident as a polite warning to me to choose my friends more carefully.

But evidently I was what is known in Algiers as *double-flique*, or monitored by both Islamist and government forces. An Algerian friend known for his anti-Islamist stance and now, as most Algerian intellectuals, on Islamic hitlists, had his tires slashed in front of my house. He said he was often followed and that he had removed the phone from his house because his wife could no longer cope with all the death threats they received. Several times he had tried to go home and found men waiting for him at the door, and even when he visits Paris, he is always hiding. Never give your whereabouts over the phone and always keep an eye on the rear view mirror, he told me. It was only later that I would learn the usefulness of those skills.

Around the time the first foreigners were killed in the conflict in late September neighborhood boys began throwing rocks at my windows.

I didn't take the events too seriously, however, until one evening in mid-October. It was not long before curfew. I was alone in my downtown apartment when someone tried to force open the front door. I heard the voices of two men at the door, but could not see them through the peep hole since the corridor was dark. I screamed, hoping the neighbors would come out, but they did not. Perhaps they thought it was too much of a risk. I dialed "17," the Algerian emergency number, and the police said they would come, but never did. They are too busy defending themselves these days, I guess. After waiting outside my door for over half an hour, the men finally left. I will never know whether they were terrorists and if so, which side they were on. Perhaps they were only thieves, but they succeeded in terrorizing me.

On October 18, three French consular employees living down the street from me were kidnapped and held for a week. They were the first foreigners to be kidnapped and released without having their throats slit, and were let go with a chilling note reading: "Foreigners, leave the country. We give you one month. Anyone passing that limit will be responsible for his own sudden death."

While one should not give too much weight to the note itself, the violent tone of the warning is not unlike that of the bi-weekly clandestine Islamic radio programs and the numerous clandestine newsletters circulated by various Islamic groups.

Radio Wafa, a clandestine Islamic program which is broadcast at three times the normal speed and so must be recorded then played back at a third the speed to be understood, is heard throughout the capital every Wednesday and Saturday evening. Although being found with a recording of the program is a direct ticket to prison, the wartime radio program is avidly listened to by a fair margin of the population and tapes of the programs circulate widely. The programs begin with the sound of gunshots and a recording of masses of Algerians chanting "There is no God but God and Mohamed is his prophet." It then reports the latest progress of the freedom fighters [Islamists] against the military regime and the assassinations carried out by terrorists [the regime] against the Algerian people's army [militant Islamists].

Clandestine newsletters also circulate widely throughout the capital and are put out in French and in Arabic by a wide number of Islamic organizations. They are generally distributed from inside or outside the country by fax, and are then posted on the walls of some mosques in the capital to be read by the faithful before they are eventually spotted and torn down by police and military forces.

An official FIS [Islamic Salvation Front] communique dated November 14 and signed by FIS information spokesman Abdel Razak Redjam, who has been in hiding in Algeria since 1992, read: "Those who cooperate with the regime that has no other objective than to remain in power will be considered as accomplices to the crime against the Algerian people."

The violence of these messages combined with the increasing violence of the response to them, both by Algerian authorities and by Western nations such as France, which seem to wholeheartedly supporting the ruling regime despite its illegitimacy and well-documented human rights abuses somehow seal the fate of the country.

Over 3,000 foreigners, mostly the families of those working in Algeria, have left the country since late October, joining the mass exodus begun by Algerians themselves months ago and dashing Algerian hopes to attract the foreign investors the country desperately needs.

A lot more is stake than just Algeria. Rheda Malek, the country's provisional head of state, told French television last week that if Algeria becomes an Islamist state, the rest of North Africa, including Egypt, will likely become Islamic states soon after. Although Western diplomats seem skeptical of the domino theory, they agree that Algeria's future will strongly influence events in neighboring states.

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

The regime which has been ruling the country since it cancelled the 1991 general elections is set to step down on December 31, yet the FIS refuses to join in any dialogue with the ruling power it calls "violently opposed to Algerian independence" and which it says resembles the French secret service during the war of independence. No other opposition party, Islamic or secular, seems to have a wide-enough support base to offer a viable alternative to the military, now running the country, or the Islamist masses fighting to overthrow the regime they voted against nearly two years ago.

It is still unclear who will be at the helm when Algerians awaken New Year's Day, although it seems most likely that the military will take and even firmer grip on the North African nation, and the Islamists, who have killed countless Algerians and at least two foreigners this week, will increase the firepower on their side as well.

What is clear is that like it or not, the West is already involved, and is likely to play an increasingly important role in the crisis as time goes on. Many of the movers and shakers behind the Islamic struggle are living in exile in the West, and the corrupt government they and their constituents are fighting to overthrow is demanding Western support to guarantee its survival.

Attempts to crush political Islam by force only seem to make it more violent, and it is becoming clearer that we have to better understand this force if we are to deal with it effectively. Political Islam need not be an enemy to the West, but the longer we treat it as a threat and not as a new entity to be understood and reckoned with, the more likely it seems to become the threat we most fear.

These are delicate and decisive times in Algeria and throughout the region and the longer Western nations hesitate to confront them, and the forces behind them, the more expensive and dangerous they will be to confront in the future.

With only weeks to go, time is running out for Algeria and the desperation on both sides of the Atlantic seems to be mounting with the approach of the long-awaited cut off date. Neither side seems set to win, however, and signs are that the deadly stalemate I have been living for the past eight months will be a war to which all of us will have to grow accustomed and in which, like it or not, we are becoming increasingly important players.

Because of the telling nature of jokes and stories in Arab culture, I've decided to include some of these tasty cultural tidbits in my newsletters. This first one says a lot about the popular image of President Chadli, who many Algerians blame for the explosion of discontent during the violent riots of October 1988 and the subsequent election results of 1991. It was Chadli who authorized the creation of the Islamic Salvation Front as a legal political party. He was forced to resign during the January 1992 coup d'etat that brought the current interim regime to power.

CULTURE CAPSULE

Former Algerian President Chadli Benjedid once paid an official visit to the White House in Washington. It was the Algerian's first visit to then-president Ronald Reagan and Chadli was awestruck at the luxurious elegance of the place. He and Reagan got on quite well and after the official business had ended, Reagan invited his Algerian counterpart to stay a few days longer to enjoy the presidential residence. Finally, Chadli could no longer contain himself.

"You have been very kind, Mr. President, and I've really appreciated this visit, but there's one question I really have to ask."

"Ask away, pal," said Reagan. "I think this is the beginning of a wonderful friendship and I want you to feel at home here. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I know you are the president of the very powerful United States and all, but this palace is incredible. How did you ever afford all this?"

Reagan paused and then broke into a smile. "Come along young friend and I'll show you something," he said, and led the Algerian leader out on to the terrace. "Look out there and tell me what you see," he said, pointing out in to the distance.

Chadli looked way out to the distance. He squinted in order to see more clearly. "I see a bridge," he said.

"That bridge cost \$5 million. On paper it cost \$50 million." he said.

Chadli was silent for a moment and then rubbed his hands together and giggled slightly. "I see," he said. "You are very wise and you are indeed a wonderful friend."

Years later it was Reagan's turn to visit Algeria and he was hardly prepared for the sight which awaited him. Upon arrival in Algiers, the American president was led to a glittering palace infinitely larger than anything the US could offer. He looked around in awe and, just before returning to the US, decided he had to go ahead and ask.

"Mr. President," he said, "this is a miserable and poor nation and your salary is very small, yet your palace is twice as large as any of my residences. However did you manage all this?"

"Ah, you are a very good friend," said Chadli, and led Reagan out to the terrace. "Look out into the distance and tell me what you see."

Reagan looked and looked some more. He squinted and got out his binoculars, but he saw nothing. Nothing. "What are you talking about, I don't see anything," he finally said.

"On paper there's a bridge," said Chadli.