

years of their lives leaning against walls in downtown areas and staring blankly into space.

Then there's the problem of sex. Theoretically one is supposed to wait until marriage to have sex here, but no family will agree to marriage with a man with no flat and no job. Western-style dating is also problematic, not only because it is considered immoral by many, because there is literally no place to go. Algerian apartments are overcrowded with brothers and uncles and aunts, hotels are expensive, and to do it in the back seat of a car, a *l'american*, requires, well, a car.

In order to deal with the difficulties of daily life, Algerians generally choose one of two options: Religion or Rai. In the case of Oran, they choose both, and seem to see little contradiction.

When asked how she could vote for a party that will ban her favorite music style if Algeria becomes an Islamic state, one woman simply shrugged her shoulders. "It's normal. I am a Muslim and I believe in God," she said, then turned up the Rai cassette to which she was listening. Some men I talked to in a local bar came up with similar responses.

At least a few locals didn't perceive the now-banned Islamic Salvation Front as a political entity so much as a natural extension of their lives as Muslims in a Muslim country. No one wants to vote against God, especially when times are tough.

For now, the bars are full and so are the mosques. New cassettes are coming out every day but my hunch is that if there were another election tomorrow, the Islamists would sweep the charts yet again. Until then, the people of Oran keep on doing what they're doing. Living and dreaming and praying life will get a little easier in the wild west.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Katherine', written over a horizontal line.

Katherine

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KLR-5

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

27 July 93.
Algiers, ALGERIA

Mr. Peter B. Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock St.
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

Despite Western stereotypes that Islamism is oppressive to women, many Algerian women opt for the veil and say that embracing Islamism improves their social status and gives them more rights than they previously had.

In an Islamic state women may inherit half of what men do, but that's a lot more than some of them they get now. In some Berber families, for example, women still don't have any right to inherit at all.

Arguments that if Algeria becomes an Islamic state women may no longer have the right to work outside the home, wear revealing clothing and drink alcohol ring hollow for many Algerian women, who find themselves unable to do those things now. The Algerian Family Code, adopted in 1984, is as close as Algerian law currently comes to *Sharia*, or Islamic Law. In article 39, the law goes so far as to state: "A women is bound to show respect to her husband and accord him the respect due a head of the family, to respect her parents, and her husband's close relatives."

For most Algerian women, the feminist ideal of an independent woman seems inaccessible. It is symbolically associated with the Western *bled alkuf* [land of infidels] and brings into question many of the most fundamental values of Algerian society. It's an uphill battle that some women say often ends up causing more harm than good, especially in the short term. If a woman here strays from social norms she is more often than not shunned, risks being thrown out of the house and may find difficulties marrying. If she tries living on her own, chances are she won't find a job to support yourself, and even if she does, she is unlikely to find affordable housing in order to move out of her parents' home.

"It was tough trying to convince women I know to attend the big feminist march in 1990. Women were afraid of what their neighbors and husbands would say and it didn't seem worth the risk to them. Finally the march took place, and soon after came the first Islamic Salvation Front marches," said Salima Ghazali, a militant feminist and editor-in-chief of

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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.

El-Nyssa, Algeria's only bilingual women's weekly. "I couldn't believe it when all the women who had come to my march traded in their feminist banners for *jilbabs* and became among the most avid supports of the FIS."



Le 8 mars 1990, marché pour une citoyenneté à part entière

El-Watan Newspaper, March 8, 1993.

She explained that in comparison to the almost-impossible ideals of Western-style feminism, being militant within the Islamic context is easy. It is respected by Algerian society, does not require questioning any traditional values and may improve life in the short term on a limited scale.

The women I have talked to who have taken to wearing the *jilbab*, the loose fitting Iranian-style garment that conceals all but a woman's face and hands and is considered a political statement in favor of an Islamic state, are no more or less religious than those who opt for Western-style clothing.

The prime reasons for going Islamic seem to be social and political. Socially, being militant within the Islamic context improves one's status in and outside the household. It gives women greater respect in a society where respect is everything. Politically, it demonstrates courage and character and is a means of supporting the struggle for an Islamic society and resisting the current regime.

This afternoon I went to an Islamic seamstress to talk religion with the "sisters" and get a closer look at what life is like for "fundamentalist" women. I decided to order a *jilbab*, a must among young Islamist women here. Young is the operative word, since I have never seen anyone much over about 35 opt for the ample robe (made of four and a half meters of rayon).

Unlike in winter, when black is the general rule for hard-line Islamists, summer opens the door to "phantoms" in colors more friendly to the North African heat and the fashion tastes of those raised on French television and croissants. Algerians summer *jilbabs* come in brilliant pea green, soft lavender, royal blue and even dusty raspberry. My own is pale salmon.

The young women who opt for such extremist dress seem to have little to do with the Western stereotype of a "fundamentalists". Contrary to the image of the Islamist woman as a silent and oppressed second sex, many of the women I've gotten to know here come across as confident and outgoing, and some say that becoming "fundamentalist" has given them a sense of power that they previously lacked.

A surprising number of these women had some involvement in Algeria's small but significant feminist movement before opting to be militant in the Islamic setting instead of that more symbolically connected with the West.

Also startling is the fact that many of the *mohajibat* I meet are of Berber, not Arab, origin. The woman who sewed my *jilbab* is from Tizi Ouzou, a city known as the Berber capital of Algiers and one which is the center of the resistance to what many Berbers call *Arabo-Islamization*. The friend that introduced me to the seamstress speaks fluent Kabyl (the Berber language common in the north of the country) and is from Bejaia, Kabylia's second city.

For those who want to be politically active, Islamism also offers opportunity. A militant Islamic group composed of 10 women was arrested outside of Algiers earlier this month and experts say other such groups continue to operate. Although women generally do not carry out attacks, they play an important role in distributing and hiding arms, and providing food, shelter, information and medical care to armed militants.



Ce n'est pourtant pas la première fois que le sexe féminin se trouve impliqué dans des actes terroristes.

Liberte' Newspaper, July 7, 1993

In the university environment, most *mohajibat* are students of science and math. In the work place they have the same types of jobs as their more Western-looking compatriots. They care as much about their looks as women anywhere.

I recently spoke with a gynecologist in El-Harache, one of the Algiers' rougher neighborhoods, which remains an Islamist stronghold. About 85 percent of his patients wear *jilbabs* and many are directly involved in the fight to create an Islamic state here. The doctor assured me that they had the same types of questions and problems as "modernist" Algerian women, including the problem of selecting an appropriate form of birth control and pregnancy before marriage.

The difference between those who opt for the *jilbab* and those who don't was equally imperceptible and a wedding I attended a couple weeks ago with the women of an Islamist family I know. Because there were no men present, the women lifted off their *jilbabs* before settling themselves at the rows of tables for tea and cakes. The woman to my right and her cousin both wore short slinky dresses. When everyone was settled in, the man playing disc-jockey for the gathering (nobody seemed to mind either the music or the man) turned up the volume. One by one, the women got up to dance (another technical sin). Several hours later, when the festivities drew to a close, my Islamist friends slipped back into their *jilbabs* and headed home.

Another enlightening incident occurred about a week before when I visited the biggest villa I have ever seen in my entire life. The sprawling Hispano-Mauresque complex featured a fountain in one of the five parlors, a mosque complete with a glow-in the dark painting of the Kaaba, and a three-room Turkish bath. As I sat with the family discussing their last vacation in the U.S. and their shopping sprees in Paris, the woman of the house arrived home. She unzipped her *jalaba*, threw off her veil (apart from family, we were all women) and joined us in the mirrored sitting room.

As is invariably the case here, the conversation soon turned to the increasing level of violence here and the escalating crime rate.

"Things would be so much better in an Islamic state," said the woman. She explained that when the Islamists operated freely there was less crime and that since embracing conservative Islam she wielded greater power within the household and had a lot more confidence in herself.

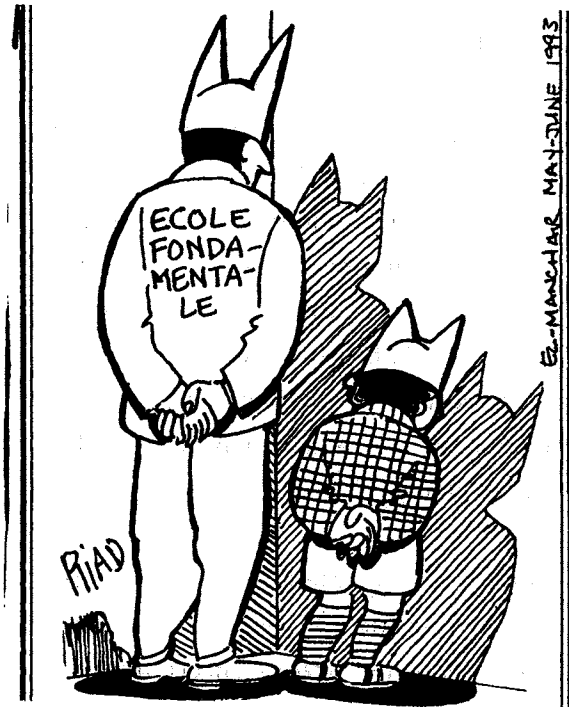
"Of course, if you go much beyond the home setting, Islamism imposes pretty rigid limitations," Fatima, one of the woman's relatives, explained to me later. "But if you're generally content with your traditional role, it is definitely liberating. It all depends on whether you want greater freedom enough to risk the little you've got, or whether you want immediate liberation with a ceiling."

Best regards,



"I speak Arabic better than I speak French, but I can't always understand the local news (broadcast only in Arabic)," a secondary school student in the casbah told me. When asked the word for "matches" in Arabic she immediately said *al-allumettes*, and explained that the only word for traffic jam was the French *embouteillage*.

The policy, which is still in force, has also given way to a situation in which university professors, educated in French, literally do not speak the same language as their students, the first generation to emerge from the *Arabized* education system. One agriculture professor at Bouzareah University said he had hired an interpreter for his fall courses because he did not speak sufficient classical Arabic and his students did not speak sufficient French. A psychology professor at the same university told me the quality of her lectures had gone down because she was unable to explain sophisticated theories in classical Arabic and was forced to simplify her lectures.



At the high school level, where classes are grossly overcrowded and books are in short supply, teachers face similar difficulties. Many of the more qualified teachers do not have a sufficient level of Arabic to teach anything but French, and those with an acceptable level of Arabic were generally trained in some of the region's big religious schools such as al-Azhar in Cairo and Zeitouna in Tunis and often lack a secular approach to their subjects.

"The problem is that in the Arab tradition, students are taught to memorize and recite. They are not taught to analyze and question. On top of that, it's almost impossible to separate Islam from Arab culture, and these kids don't have the intellectual tools to question all the people in positions of authority who tell them Islam is the solution," explained a French language teacher in one of Algiers' largest high schools, where about 150 teachers try to meet the needs of about 3,000 students.

"It's crazy," a University of Algiers chemistry professor told me. "We had such an advantage over other countries because we spoke a European language and were