

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Turning inward



An Algerian "hitliste" - the local term for the unemployed young men who spend their days standing on street corners around the capital - standing in front of the housing project where he lives.

Dear Peter:

Salima and her nieces used to wander through the narrow streets of the casbah, the old section of Algiers, Wednesday mornings to go to the Turkish bath. Sitting on the worn tiles and basking in steam from the scalding water, they would scrub each other down and discuss their hopes and dreams. They would tell jokes and exchange remarks about the daily events that, put together, make a life.

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Once last month Salima and I even went out to dinner. "You went to dinner alone?!", asked my friend Abdel-Karim in surprise the following day. "No, Salima and I went together. We were not alone," I answered. "But the two of you were alone. That's really not advisable," he said. If we had brought along one of her young nephews we would not have been alone, but we didn't. Those were days of boldness and laughter.

But that was last month. Salima doesn't go out much any more. She says it's better to hang low in these difficult times, preferring the security of the one bedroom apartment she shares with her sister and her sister's four young children. There are killings in the casbah nearly every day now and the children are no longer surprised at the sound of gunshots in the night. Sometimes government forces attack Islamists. Sometimes the other way around. And just as often, neither of the above. Personal revenge, a robbery turned violent, silencing someone who knows too much, a family dispute, or just somebody in the wrong place at the wrong time. A lot of things can and do happen, and often the result is neighbors killing neighbors.

The streets of Algiers now stand deserted after about 8:30 p.m., although the curfew that has been in force for nearly a year now doesn't start until 11:30. A month ago restaurants still did a brisk business in the evening. Now dinner clientele are few and far between. Like Salima, many Algerians have been turning inward these past few weeks.

I visited Salima two weeks ago and she hadn't been out in three days. It's not just political crime she's worried about, but crime in general. Prices of some products have nearly doubled since I moved to Algiers eight months ago, and with salaries frozen, unemployment hovering at about 25 percent, and still no answer to the question of who will run the country after December 31, desperation is setting in fast.

"It's not their fault they steal," said Salima, after two neighborhood men recently walked up on either side of her and, at the same time, pulled her earrings off and ran away with them. "Even one gold earring can put enough food on the table to make a difference," she said.

On the other side of the capital, in gritty maze of apartment buildings known as Bab El-Zouar, Yussef is, like Salima, turning inward. An orthodox Christian from Lebanon, he moved to Algeria eight years ago to teach genetics at a local university. As we talked in his sparsely-furnished apartment to exchange news and sip a little Arak [the anise liquor common in Lebanon and Syria] in the company of friends, he said he worries that as the popular crackdown on "infidels" deepens, he may well find his name on an Islamic hit list.

He sent his wife and child back home a couple months ago and is waiting to be paid the past four months' salary due to him before fleeing the country himself. Until then, he survives as best he can without a salary and waits. Although there is frequent gunfire around his home, he said it's where he teaches that worries him, not where he lives.

"My students scare me," he said. "When I try to explain a scientific theory they look in the Qor'an for evidence of it. They hand in scientific papers that begin with the phrase 'In the name of Allah, most generous, most merciful' and are interspersed with Qor'anic verses. I used to try and explain to them the need to separate science from religion. Now I keep my mouth shut, but I fear that they remember when I used to speak my mind." There are many teachers in Algiers who, like Yussef, live in fear and keep their thoughts to themselves.

The mood in the enormous high school near his university is likewise solemn. On a recent visit I had to maneuver past an armed tank to get to the front gate of the school. It was October 6, the morning after the anniversary of the 1988 riots that started of the country's

rapid liberalization process which ended abruptly when Algeria's first democratic presidential elections were cancelled to keep Islamists from winning. This year, neighborhood Islamists commemorated the October 5th anniversary by passing out candles in the mosque, firing rounds from a passing ambulance, killing several policemen, and assassinating one of the high school's philosophy teachers.

"After 1988 [the philosophy teacher] really believed this was a democracy. He talked too much," explained one of his colleagues, who said she had witnessed the shooting. "We kept telling him to keep quiet about his views and 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 teachers told me they suspected high students may have been to blame for the assassination 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, some of whom were going through high school for second and third times because of having failed the high school graduating exam along with 88 percent of last year's seniors.

"We're all disturbed by the problems last night, but we must finish this text and move on to the next chapter," the teacher said. Gunshots were heard but the class forged ahead to discuss how to organize an expository essay in French.

"I get so depressed about things that it takes extra effort to come to school these days, and once here, it takes extra effort to keep students focussed on the lessons," the teacher told me as we headed for the teacher's lounge after class. "But they must concentrate. Education is the only way to get the country back on track."

Despite her brave exterior at school, at home the French teacher no longer says "hello" when she answers the phone. First she listens to see if she recognizes the caller and, if she doesn't she hangs up the phone. Like Salima and Youssef, she says she is spending an increasing amount of time at home with her family and seldom ventures out in the evenings.

Rachid Mimouni, one of the last internationally known Algerian writers left in the country, says he, too, lives in fear. "I am constantly afraid. They've killed over a dozen intellectuals here and they almost never miss their target."

An Algerian journalist friend of mine said he had disconnected his telephone to save his family from listening to threatening callers and dared remain in the country only because he was willing to live in hiding. He never gives his whereabouts over the phone and is extremely careful about what he says and to whom.

In a luxurious apartment in central Algiers, a Syrian widow and her daughter, who have lived in Algeria since the country won its independence, are likewise turning inward. Although both of them experienced Beirut during its war years, they told me that psychologically Algiers is more difficult.

"In Beirut life somehow went on as usual. You could buy bread and chocolate even in the worst of times, and neighbors helped each other out," said the elder of the two women.

"Here the violence gets in your head and it's hard to get away from it. You can't open the door and you can't trust even your closest friends."

She said that although their building is secure, twice now people have rung their doorbell in the evening claiming to be police, a tactic often used to by terrorists and thieves to gain entry into the homes of unwitting victims. "I didn't answer of course, you never know who it could be," she said. For her, as for many other residents of Algiers, sleep no longer comes easy at night and insomnia is a frequent companion to the solitude of distrust.

No one seems unaffected by the situation here, which many residents now refer to as war, and the fact that that attackers are likely to be relatives, neighbors, students or office-mates, has made turning inward ones' best defense.

Yussef only leaves his Bab El-Zouar flat to go to school and to by groceries. He never goes downtown and says if things continue this way he may leave even if he doesn't get paid his back wages.

Most of the country's leading intellectuals have already fled and, with seven foreigners assassinated here in the past month, foreign residents have now begun doing as their Algerian counterparts do; making the decision either to leave or to turn inward and keep a low profile.

Salima doesn't know when it'll be safe to walk in her neighborhood again, or when she'll next dare dining out "alone", but she doubts it'll be next week or the week after. For now, she's opting out of the Turkish bath and saving her dreams and laughter for better times.



*Dessin de Maz
Maz, 47 ans, a d'abord travaillé dans Mekuidech,
un journal de BD pour enfants. Passé ensuite
à El Moudjahid, il a remporté un prix national
de caricature en 1988. Il est le dessinateur d'El Watan
depuis sa création en 1990.*

*This drawing by Maz, the award winning cartoonist of the Algerian
El Watan newspaper, recently appeared in the French Courier International weekly.*