INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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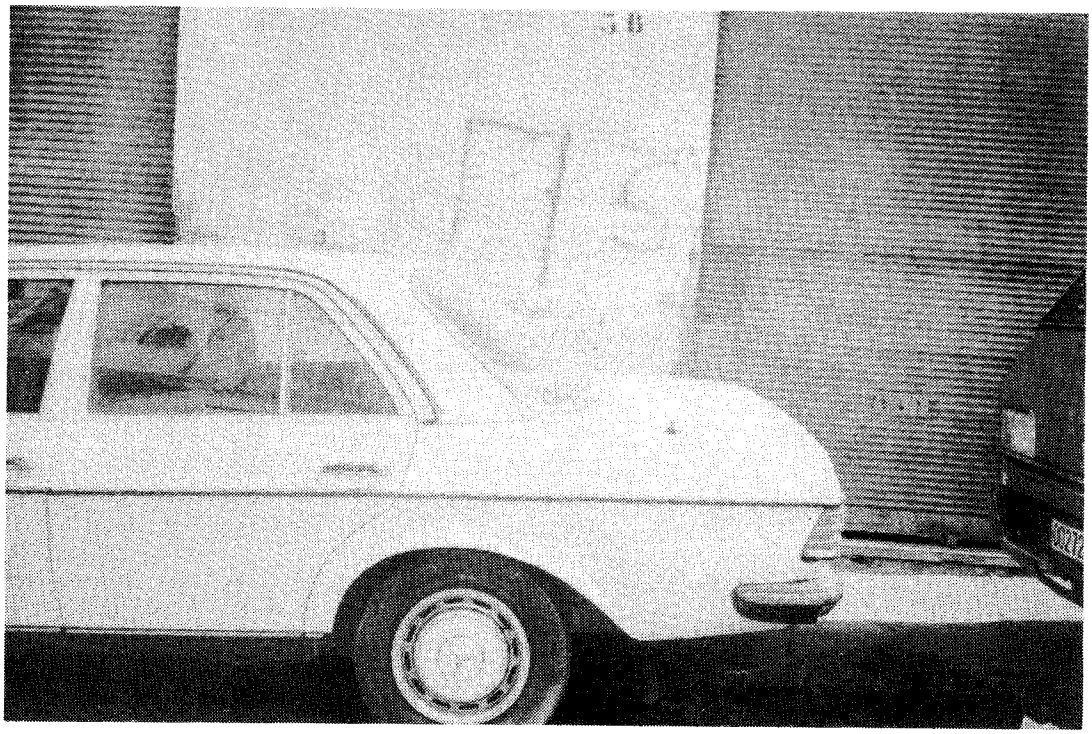
Islamists: My first six months



This Mercedes-Benz was parked in front of FIS graffiti in an Algiers alley.

Dear Peter:

The Islamist movement seems to be gaining momentum and the powers that be don't seem to be able to do much more than they're already doing to stop the tide. The biggest event in the past six

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months has been the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian accord, which, in the streets of Cairo and Algiers, has folks up in arms. Keep in mind that many Arabs are still against Sadat's signing of 1979 Camp David Accord with Israel and that sympathy for his assassins still runs high. My hunch is that the latest moves toward Mideast peace will increase grassroots support for militant Islamist groups, just as the Gulf War did, and as the Sadat assassination did before it.

These are pivotal times in the Arab world and Algeria is at the forefront of the clash between a corrupt and inefficient power structure which, at least on the surface, looks pretty modern, and an Islamic alternative, which, although admittedly utopian, fragmented, and often violent, has been the only truly legitimate power here ever since the landslide elections and subsequent coup d'état of 1992.

Apart from two short visits to Cairo, two visits to the Berber village of Ait-Issad and brief trips to Oran and Blida, I have spent most of the previous six months "constructively hanging out" in Algiers, mostly with "modernist" Algerians (due to obvious political constraints), but trying whenever possible to put myself on the inside of the "fundamentalist" movement.

I have spent a lot of time in the casbah and other poor and Islamist-dominated neighborhoods of Algiers, I visited a founding member of the now-banned Islamic Salvation Front [FIS] in Oran, and have spent extensive time with a pretty typical middle class Islamist family. On the secularist side, I have met with Said Saadi, the leader of the Berber RCD party now in-hiding because of numerous death-threats from Islamist groups.

I'm currently teaching English to teenagers in the casbah and have gotten the go-ahead to give occasional English classes at Frere Hamdia High School in Kouba, one of the city's largest high schools in one of its most Islamist neighborhoods. High school really is the the front line of the battle here. Many of the male students are involved in what could be called Islamist terrorism, and, besides police officers, the most common victims are teachers and other intellectuals. Because 88 percent of the students fail the Baccalaureate exam (given the final year of school), and so cannot enter college or find good jobs, many end up either joining the police force or the militant Islamic groups. High school is as far as most Algerians get up the educational ladder and it's the last chance the state has got to intellectually equip its citizens and future decision-makers. Considering that 75 percent of Algerians are under 30 and many students are going through high school for second or third time in an attempt to pass the baccalaureate, high school is pretty representative of Algerian society as a whole. Visiting the high school is an excellent chance to talk with Islamists and police officers before they hit the streets, to understand how they think and how they understand their country.

I have also been studying. My first few months were spent studying local Algerian Arabic, and I am now studying Classical Arabic in order to improve my literacy and better understand Islamists, who tend to mix a lot of Classical Arabic terms in with the local dialect. In the past six months I have read the Hadith, most of the Qor'an, and a fair number of the basic texts on the Arab Islamist movement.

To the untrained eye, Algiers looks pretty calm. Beneath the surface, however, the country is on the boil.

The situation here has changed considerably since my arrival. I have seen families collapse under the strain of the situation in Algeria. I have never before seen a society so corrupt and ridden with mistrust. Incest is a serious but unspoken problem in Algeria [perhaps in part because of the severe overcrowding in homes] and many women do not marry because they fear the shame that would come with admitting they are not virgins and have been molested by brothers or fathers. I have not yet been able to find any statistics on the rate of incest here, but I am shocked by how many of the people I meet say they have been molested by family members. The political situation adds interfamilial arrests and assassinations to the already stark social equation as Algerian society becomes increasingly polarized by the battle for and against an Islamic state. There is little remaining solidarity within the family unit. Neighborhood communities based on ideology have become a surrogate for family unity and now resemble almost tribal groupings. Friendships among those in the same neighborhood and on the same side of the struggle are often stronger than family ties and friendships between those with differing views on the crisis are virtually nonexistent.

While it is in some ways easiest to analyze a society during a time of crisis, the difficult political situation also becomes increasingly limiting in terms of my work here. I have been visited by police in my apartment once, in what I now believe was a warning by Algerian authorities to stay away from Islamists. I have been attacked twice in the past few weeks, once in Cairo and once in the casbah here in Algiers a couple days ago. While both of these incidents could well have been simple thefts, they illustrate people's desperation. I have been in the vicinity of gunfights in Blida and, most recently, in the casbah, where I was present when a 24-yr-old policeman was shot dead. Many of my friends, on both sides of the struggle, have left the country. As it becomes more difficult to talk with people and the physical risks increase, I begin to ask myself how long my dive into Algerian life will remain productive. After all, my interest is the causes at the root of the struggle, not the sociology of war.

As for my current view of the forces at hand, I have to admit I am not nearly as starry-eyed as I was before arriving here. Neither side seems all that modern after all. The "modernists" are a lot less modern and forward thinking than they seem. There are forward-thinking Islamists with intelligent ideas about how to build a modern and Islamic state, but as the social crisis gives way to war, these Islamic intellectuals are increasingly likely to remain in the obscure backwaters of the movement. There are basically two different sides, which literally and symbolically speak two different languages, and therefore cannot communicate. Both sides are traditional and propose radically different methods of modernization. The struggle seems to be more a competition between these two methods of modernization than a fight between modern and traditional. The lack of consensus and middle-ground, however, makes meaningful negotiation impossible and all-out war more likely.

Perhaps one of the most positive aspects of the Islamist leadership is their ability to mobilize the disenfranchised and offer hope to the masses, an ability that was already proven in the 1950s and 1960s

when staunchly Islamist forces (as opposed to the so-called modernists, who have always been slow on the uptake) successfully organized independence struggles throughout the region. Many Algerian Islamist leaders are literally the children of those who led the country's independence struggle thirty years ago (which partly explains all the parallels between current strategies and those used against colonists a generation ago). At the grassroots level, Islamism seems relatively positive. Community and social action groups organized under the banner of Islam did a lot to improve some of the cities' poorest neighborhoods, and the crime rate when "the brothers" were free was much lower that it was before or has been since the government crackdown. The problem is that this energy and will for change, while ostensibly productive at the grassroots level, seems to be ultimately usurped by the political and military leaders of the movement, the most important by far being Ali Benhadj, whose close links with the Sadat's assassins and the Palestinian Jihad party are well-documented and who is anything but reformist in his thinking.

I am more convinced than ever that the real problem boils down to a conflict between tradition and modernity. Like the populations of American ghettos like Harlem, the backbone of the Algerian Islamist movement comes from people who have, for the most part, lost their traditional identity but have not benefited from life in an industrial setting. They are left with the worst of both worlds. No traditional values or structural basis and, at the same time, no modern (by this I mean rational and forward-thinking, not necessarily Western) outlook. The only populations in Algeria that seem to have resisted the movement are those who have either conserved their links with traditional society (Kabyles, Mozabites, Tuaregs and those living near the Moroccan border) or those who have indeed benefited from a modernist outlook (those in power or those educated and, for the most part, employed, in France and other Western countries). The populations of Islamist strongholds such as the casbah, Bab El-Oued, Belcourt, Harrache and Kouba, unlike a generation ago, are now largely composed of first generation immigrants from the countryside, who are neither fully here nor there, and for whom Islam is, indeed, the only *known* solution.

Another side of the problem lies with Islam itself. Although Islamist activists are often no more religious than their Western-looking counterparts, the roots of the conflict seem as much ideological as sociological. Muslims believe in God, and they believe that God wrote the Qor'an. The Qor'an (therefore God) clearly states that Islam is both a religious and a political system and that religion and state should be one. God also clearly calls for Islamic law. Even the most adamant modernists here (all of whom are Muslim) have failed to defend Western-style democracy in Islamic terms, and until it is adequately defended with respect to the Islamic belief system, it will never have a solid base in predominantly Muslim countries and the region will always risk militant fundamentalism.

In this sense, the Islamist movement in the Arab world sometimes reminds me of Nazism in Germany. As long as Germans define themselves along ethnic as opposed to national lines, racism and Nazism will be a threat to the country's stability, just as "fundamentalism" will be a threat to Arab stability as long as Arab Muslims fail to reconcile their culture/religion with a modernist outlook. In both cases, the problems lie in the way populations define

themselves as much as with the political and economic problems of the time, which may bring out the symptoms of these inherent threats, but are not their root cause.

Although the comparison between Nazism in Germany and Islamism here may seem shocking, the more I understand Islamists the more it comes to mind. It's a problem of self-definition, and is most obvious when the contradiction between this self-definition and reality is greatest. Just as many Germans refused to accept the existence of concentration camps in the Germany that best fit their self-definition, a surprisingly high number of Islamist-supporters here refuse to admit that the widespread violence carried out in the name of Islam is being committed by Islamists. Taking the comparison one step further, it is interesting to note that Hitler was democratically elected, as (almost) was the Islamic Salvation Front.

I will never forget a video I once saw of one of the FIS election campaigns held in Algiers' biggest stadium. One of the speakers was Mohamed Assaid, a FIS official who, during World War Two, sided with the Germans against the French and was allegedly trained by the German SS. He returned to his native country only after its independence and has been active in the fight for an Algerian Islamic state ever since. The style of his speech was frighteningly reminiscent of clips I have seen of talks given by Nazi leaders during the war. He ended his speech by raising his right hand in what was almost a Nazi salute and crying "Allah is great." The packed Algerian stadium broke into wild applause. The memory still chills me.

The further I get into my research, the more I feel split in two by the conflict. I can understand the logic and the fears of both sides, and I also realize that there are so many variations of belief and conviction on each side that generalizations quickly lose their meaning.

What I see around me is a struggle to define Islam itself. It is this grappling with the very definition of Islam [and the Muslim Arab world] and the meaning of modernization that makes this such an important time in the region. It is precisely this chance for profound re-definition and change that keeps me going when times are tough here. I have never been as fascinated with a subject as I am with the roots of the current struggle in this region.

During the course of my past six months here, which have been personally more challenging than possibly any prior period of my life, I realized that this endeavor was more than a two-year Fellowship. I have decided to make this region my life, partly because I think it may take that long to work out my passion for the forces behind what is too often called the Islamic threat to the West [what about the Western threat to Islam?], and partly because I now see that this somehow resembles the struggle many Americans are grappling with when they decry the country's social collapse and call for a return to "family values". What should the role of traditional or family values be in an ideal modern society? What does it mean to be modern, anyway?

Being modern, it seems, has nothing to do with whether one wears Islamic or Western clothing or what language one speaks. An Islamic Sheikh might be modern and an English-speaking Arab in a business suit might not be. It's a sense of accountability and an attitude of

openness to change. Being modern means one has enough confidence in logic that one is willing to undergo reasonable change and risk the known for the unknown. A society that does not change and adapt is a declining society. Until Arab Muslims as a whole can reconcile this attitude of change and accountability with their self-definition and the belief system on which it is based, they will always be consumers and not producers, and their independence struggle will not have been completed. That, it seems to me, is what the struggle here is all about. If Islamists can bring this outlook into their belief system they will indeed have won the struggle for meaningful Arab independence, and until the modernists can do so their power will be hollow and somehow illegitimate.

I will tentatively start the second phase of my project around February, when I plan to move to Yemen, a traditional Arab-Islamic society that seems to be successfully managing the modernist transition gone so sadly astray in Algeria. I am eager to see how the dynamics of the transition there compare with the dynamics of the conflict in Egypt and in Algeria (which are in many ways similar).

Is the society there as divided between symbolically European and symbolically Islamic as that in Egypt and in Algeria? Could one reason for Yemen's relative success be the fact that a smaller percentage of the population has given up their traditional ties before being assured some of the benefits of a more modern life without them? Do Yemeni Islamists have the same types of views and backgrounds as their Algerian or Egyptian counterparts? How cohesive is the movement and how does this cohesion vie with nationalist and humanist sentiments?

I also hope to put greater concentration into my writing, which has necessarily taken a back seat to my pursuit of a solid first-hand education in the fundamental issues and texts of the current struggle in the Arab world. As I deepen my understanding of the issues at hand, my writing will become increasingly important to my goals of not only understanding, but also expressing and recording the pivotal changes underway in this region.

After six months of exploration I have more questions than answers. My perceptions of Islamists and "modernists" have changed completely, as has my understanding of what it means to be a Muslim Arab. The main result of the past six months of "constructive hanging out" is more an understanding of the form and direction my future exploration must take than a sense of having attained a specific goal. I am more enthusiastic than ever about my headlong dive into the Arab conception of Islam and the struggle between tradition and the modernization process in the Arab world.

Best regards and *salamualaykum*,

K. Roth

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The Grand Mosque of Algiers

Berber village women singing as they prepare a wedding feast.