

Algeria: Ordinary Fascism, Fundamentalism and Femicide

Tuesday 13 April 2010, by [HELIE LUCAS Marieme](#) (Date first published: 31 July 2001).

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□[31 July 2001] What started in Hassi Messaoud, Algeria on the night of July 13-14, 2001 is NOT one more crime/violence/violation in the wartime situation that our country has now become famous for. A qualitative change has taken place. For the first time one has witnessed crimes committed not by the organised troops of fundamentalist armed groups (GIA*, AIS* and the like), but a pogrom conducted by ordinary citizens brainwashed by the incendiary speeches/preaches of a FIS* inspired Imam against another category of ordinary citizens. □

In other words we moved from violations committed by a fascist party, to mobbing by people inspired by the same ideology. This damage, self inflicted by the people of Algeria on the people of Algeria, will now take generations to heal and has laid the couch for the coming back of the Islamists on the political scene.

□The Facts

□According to early reports from the independent Algerian press, during the night of Friday July 13 to Saturday July 14, after the sermon of the Friday 13th prayers at the mosque by an Islamist imam, Amar Taleb, in the Saharan city of Hassi Messaoud, the most ancient oil station in the country, a mob of 300 men attacked working women in the city area called Bouamama. These were mostly cleaning personnel and a few secretaries and cooks [1], all employed by foreign oil companies. The women had been imported from North-Western cities of Algeria, poverty being the reason for this emigration from within: their meagre salaries helped feed a whole extended family, not only the children of these widows and divorcees – but also parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, etc... [2] Witnesses said that the Imam accused these women of ‘immoral’ behaviour and called on the men in the mosque to a ‘jihad against the Evil’ and to ‘chase the women fornicators out of the area’ [3], on the ground that since they were living on their own by themselves, that is without a ‘wali’, meaning the male guardian of the Maliki tradition, - hence they could be considered to be prostitutes.

□In this process of “purification of the area”, women were murdered, tortured, stabbed, mutilated and raped – including three young women who were virgins (indeed ‘prostitutes’!) who claim they were gang raped [4]. Their houses were robbed, looted and some were set on fire. Security forces intervened at 3 am. The pogrom continued on July 14-15 in the area of Hassi Messaoud called ‘area 136’, and went on July 16 in the area called ‘area 200’. On July 17 and then on July 23-24 similar events took place in the Southern city of Tebessa, where not only the houses of single women but also shops owned by women, such as hair dressing salons, were also attacked. In Hassi Messaoud, 95 women who have been attacked [5], plus some that ‘could be attacked’ have been locked up by

the authorities 'for their protection' [6] in a youth hostel guarded by security forces. Till today, they are not allowed to leave the place, not even to regain their hometowns. They are sequestered without access to medicines and sufficient food [7]. However, more and more women gather at the gates and plead in vain with the armed guards to be admitted inside: but the hostel is filled to the brim [8].

Independent journalists report that the Imam and, depending on the reports, between 9 and 40 of the identified perpetrators [[*La Tribune*, July 17 mentions the arrest of the Imam and of about 40 young men, and 4 to 6 deceased women. *Le Matin* confirms only 9 arrests and *El Watan* slightly more. Later reports mention that the Imam has not been arrested and that he denies having called for the attack on the women. The authorities deny that there were women who died in the attacks but witnesses testify that they saw several of them dead.]] - that included some of the owners of the poor shacks rented out for a very high price to the working women - may have been arrested by the police and could be in the process of being tried.

Background

The first reported case of an organised, collective and religiously inspired attack on women took place in Ouargla, another southern city of Algeria as early as June 1989, i.e. long before the end of the electoral process that is often invoked as an explanation of and, strangely enough somehow, as a justification for the crimes committed by fundamentalist armed groups on ordinary people. The house of a divorcee, named Ouarda, who was living by herself with her numerous children, was burnt to ashes by a mob. In the process, the youngest of her children, a handicapped child aged 4 who could not escape the flames in the night, was burnt to death. The police did not intervene.

The Algerian feminist Khaleda Messaoudi gave a detailed account of this case to an international audience on the occasion of the UN World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993 - at a time when it was crystal clear that the war against women was part and parcel of the FIS program of sexual apartheid in Algeria. This first reported case was followed by similar individual attacks in other cities. [9]

However, it is in the early 70's that women employed in state owned factories in Sidi Bel Abbès (north-west of Algiers) were stoned by men on their way to the plant and prevented access to their work place. At first the police had to close down the factories. They later reopened but for several weeks women workers had to be protected by the authorities on the way to work.

Throughout the nineties, AIS and GIA killers attacked thousands of women at random: the list of murdered women established by the Observatory of Human Rights in Algiers is eloquent: it ranges from veiled to unveiled women, working women to housewives... with a special mention for women who earned their living by 'beautifying' women (hairstylists, aestheticians, etc...).

The Algerian feminist Zazi Sadou gave testimony on these cases to the international audience of the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1996.

In Hassi Messaoud, the assailants went to war against women shouting 'Allah Houwa Akbar' (God is the highest); they were also shouting slogans against the state ('down with the hogra' - 'hogra' being the term the Algerians have been using for decades to stigmatise the contempt and arrogance of governments vis a vis the people); they were also shouting against the women 'foreigners' who came to 'steal the jobs' of the local population. [10]

All the ingredients of fascism are there: from the blessing of God and religion ('Gott mit uns' i.e.

'God is with us' was engraved on the buckle of the SS belts), to the identification and demonisation of a 'subhuman' category of citizens that can and should be physically eliminated (the 'untermensch') and to the scapegoat 'foreigner' who is held responsible for social disarray.

□ It is NOT the first time in recent history that the extreme right political groups and parties make use of people's discontent. Fascism has always built on the legitimate protest of the dispossessed classes, backed by middle class who fear that their share of the cake is not big enough or could be threatened. Fascism manipulates and subverts it and finally points at a scapegoat fragment of the population as THE cause of social disarray. There is no doubt that the successive governments of Algeria have progressively given up on the promises of independence to the people. The gap between rich and poor grows wider and wider [11]. The mass of very young lumpen proletariat [12] grows more hostile to the privileges of the New Class that not only ruled the country for its benefits for decades but also now openly loots it.□□

Social protest has been hijacked by the FIS party since the 70s, - long before the halting of the electoral process that could have taken them to power legally in 1991. FIS was the only political force that successfully organized underground starting from independence in 1962. It is the party that manipulated the first public demonstrations and riots against the state in 1989 and long preceded the democratic parties that sprung up after the political and economic 'liberalisation' of 1990, which led to the present enormous gap between rich and poor.

□□ Recent protests, marches, demonstrations and riots that were initiated in the Berber areas and are now springing up all over the country, have attempted - not with full success - to articulate and relocate political protest in the class struggle context where it belongs, rather than in the religious terrain or the 'cultural' one.

□ In wake of this danger of a real political awakening and popular organising, the fundamentalist parties are launching an all out new offensive - the incendiary preaching of the Imam of Hassi Messaoud being only a small part of it. To it, we must add the raging rise of killings and violence against the civilian population (several hundred deaths a month for the past one year), the arrogance of the so-called 'repented' (i.e. ALL the former terrorists from AIS and GIA who were pardoned unilaterally by the President Bouteflika and came back from their "guerrilla personas" without surrendering their arms, to their villages and cities where they, again, threaten people who do not abide by their rules (no music, dress code, etc.) and women in particular. [13]

□ But their main offensive is on the diplomatic front: more and more people in Algeria are extremely worried at the prospect of an alliance of Bouteflika with any one of the fundamentalist parties, and even by a total legal rehabilitation of FIS - an alliance that has been indicated by Bouteflika's speeches and attitudes in an increasingly clear manner in the past few months, after he pardoned the terrorists without investigation or judgement and declared the 'civil concordia'. The President has even warned women that they should not 'provoke the Islamists' by their behaviour [14]. This 'plot' is presently denounced all over the independent press in Algeria [15].

□ The overwhelming silence of the international media on the pogrom in Hassi Messaoud and other cities speaks for itself: these events simply do not fit into the simplistic representation that they have given of the Algerian situation, hence they do not exist and cannot be reported. Until the early 90's the international media reported widely about the violations committed by the state against the fascist fundamentalists. Not that they should not have reported on these violations... But how come they did not report when the state was torturing and slaughtering the communists, the democrats and the secularists in the 60's, the 70's and the 80's? How come they barely reported on the violations and systematic crimes of the fascist fundamentalists starting from the 70's, then in the 80's? How is it that, at the height of the killings, in the 90's, when intellectuals, artists, foreigners,

secularists and ordinary women were slaughtered and entire villages massacred, the media took little time to launch a campaign «who kills who?» in order to inculcate doubts about the actual responsibility of the Islamists in these crimes, – despite those being announced by their own identifiable «communiqués», then implemented and subsequently claimed by the armed groups?

This campaign aimed at charging the Algerian state with the crimes committed by the Islamists and making the latter appear as victims of the state, not as violators. Why? : The study ordered by the Rand Corporation and written by Graham Fuller a few years ago, crudely states that the USA needs above all to protect their interests in the Algerian Oil, and that a FIS government will preserve those best. The failure to recognize that Algeria is facing a life or death struggle for or against fascism seems hard to believe, if one does not also remember that similar blindness was prevailing when the mujahidin - later the Taliban were gaining power in Afghanistan. The same blindness and desire for conciliation unfortunately applied to the rise of Hitler. The myth of «moderate Islamists» needing to be given legal recognition in order to bring peace in Algeria cannot survive the ordinary fascism of the pogroms in Hassi Messaoud. We are still to hear any official protest from the fundamentalist parties and their clear statement on the rights of women to earn a livelihood for themselves and their families wherever they find a job in their own country, as well as their right to live without a male guardian.

□It is the responsibility of the fascist Islamist project on the Algerian society when brain washed mobs believe that they have the right and duty to be the judges and executioners of working women. Their 'opinion' on the place and role of women in society is in total opposition to international law and humanitarian law, and thus cannot be protected as 'freedom of speech'. It is the 'freedom of speech' of the Imam of Hassi Messaoud that immediately provoked the pogrom.

We call on the anti fascists forces in the world to oppose the fascist project in Algeria. We call on them to make a clear cut difference between, on the one hand, the need to protect human rights of all citizens -including the human rights of the fascists and of their victims as well - and the clear and final opposition with which their project of society and their political program needs to be met.

□A group of concerned Algerian democrats is presently planning to launch an International Tribunal on Fascist Fundamentalism that will also point at the international linkages of fundamentalist groups from one country to the other - and the implication of European states and the USA in the backing of fundamentalist armed groups.

Mahl

Glossaire

* FIS: Islamic Salvation Front

* AIS: Islamic Salvation Army

* GIA: Islamic Armed Groups

P.S.

* From WLUML, DOSSIER 23-34, July 2001:

Footnotes

[1] «Cleaning women, secretaries and cooks» *Le Matin* n° 2856, Tuesday July 17, 2001, p.2, Youssef Rezzoug.

[2] Testimony of Fatima, quoted in *L'Actualité en Question*, article by S.L.: She earned 11,000 dinars (US\$146.00) per month, for cleaning the apartments of the employees of the oil company she was working for, out of which she spent 4,500 dinars as her share of the rent of the room she shared with her cousin's sister who also worked for the same company. She commented: 'How could I refuse (this work), I who have charge of 18 people of my family, including five nephews who have been orphaned? They used to come together, four or five women in order to rent one room from a family house, or even a garage, for 9,000 to 10,000 per month'. *Le Matin* n° 2856, Tuesday July 17, 2001, p.2, Youssef Rezzoug.

[3] «jihad against El Fassal», in *La Tribune*, "L'escalade à Hassi Messaoud", Youcef Rezzoug.

[4] « Among the 20 wounded women I saw there were 17 girls » *Le Matin*, idem «Three of them are in intensive care at the city hospital. Houria is 25 year old. During the night of Friday-Saturday, she was gang raped. 'They were about 60 men to attack me and my sister' she cries, 'I was a virgin and I never ceased pleading and begging them and shouting: 'Don't! I am a virgin!' They penetrated me in all possible ways. One of the assailants pushed his whole fist into my bleeding sexual organ' she cries». «I have seen a woman who has been sodomised with an iron bar, while the police, under order, did not move' recounts Houria». *Le Matin*, July 17.

[5] « Young women and old women, about one hundred of them, with about 20 children are spending the third night in a youth hostel where conditions of living are appalling ». *Le Matin*, July 17.

[6] « Women who could be targeted at by the youth of these areas have been placed in the youth hostel by the authorities ... 'in order to better ensure their security' ». *Le Matin*, idem.

[7] After visiting the victims Khaleda Messaoudi (elected representative of government) stated that the women 'have no use of speeches, they need medical and psychological care and to be rehabilitated through the legal persecution of the tortionnaires' *Le Matin* n°2859, July 20-21, 2001.

[8] «The youth hostel is already full. The persons in charge of this place have refused yesterday the right to enter it to several young women who begged for it. 'The situation is getting worse in area 200, I want to come in,' shouted a woman to the person in charge of the youth hostel. 'What can I do,' he asked, 'we are not equipped.' » *La Tribune* idem «They cannot bear anymore 'this prison' the gates of which are locked and guarded by policemen» *Le Matin*, idem.

[9] «In the name of moral order which foments punitive expeditions, acid throwing at women in student hostels, arson in Ouargla, Remchi and elsewhere, assassinations, rapes, harassment of couples, the cowards always target women - women who are only guilty of being visible and dignified». Statement of women's organisation RAJD (Algerian Assembly of Democratic Women), after the pogrom in Hassi Messaoud, published in *Le Matin* n°2857, July 18, 2001.

The Coming Back of Inquisition': 'These two horrible nights unfortunately come to remind us of punitive expeditions organised by fundamentalist commandos who targeted women from 1989 to 1991 throughout the national territory, and far before this phenomenon extended to the whole society and was labelled terrorism. Thus from 1989 to 1991 all over, in Ouargla, M'sila, Bou Saada, Jijel, Annaba, Mostaganem, Mascara, Blida, Algiers, etc... widowed and divorced women as well as female students in student hostels were submitted to moral and physical violence aimed at, according to these inquisitors, 'purifying society' by the fire and by the blood. What followed demonstrated that, by attacking the feeblest part of society and submitting it to fear, it is the whole of Algeria that they are trying to condition by terror. For a society that is conditioned by terror is a paralysed society to which the most totalitarian project can be imposed'. Statement by women's organisation RACHDA: *Le Matin* July 17.

The organisations that protested within Algeria included: the National Association SOS Distressed Women that declared that it would file a court case on behalf of the victims in Hassi Messaoud; the National Committee against Forgetting and Treason, CNOT, that protested against the unilateral pardon of terrorists by President Bouteflika, and the International Federation of Associations of Victims of Terrorism - Algerian Section. *Le Matin* July 18. On the 18th of July, three women deputies including the well-known feminist Khaleda Messaoudi, went to visit the women who had been attacked in Hassi Messaoud. *Le Matin* n°2859, July 20-21, 2001.

[10] «A youth states that he does not regret anything of what happened to the women for they are the ones who 'robbed the sons of the city (ouled el bled) of their daily bread (gagne-pain)'».

[11] The population growth is still 2.28%. 32% of the population is illiterate.

[12] 50% of the population is under 19.

[13] Over the past two years, since the 'repented' or 'pardoned' Islamists returned home, numerous reports came out in the independent Algerian press regarding shopkeepers harassed, threatened and scared for having had a radio playing in their shop; young women being publicly threatened for being outside their homes without a male guardian. 'Repented' Islamist armed groups are making clear allusions to the fact that fundamentalists will come back to power and that they will punish all those who fail to abide by their rules now.

[14] Over the past month, President Bouteflika alluded in several of his public speeches to the fact that women should dress in a way that would not 'provoke the Islamists', should not smoke in public, etc.

[15] Over the past month, President Bouteflika alluded in several of his public speeches to the fact that women should dress in a way that would not 'provoke the Islamists', should not smoke in public, etc.

On the alliance between President Bouteflika and the FIS, see the titles of *Le Matin* n°2858, Thursday July 19, 2001 on p 1: 'THEY are back: the islamist leaders reinvest the scene', 'The islamist army of Bouteflika'; And on p 2 and 3: 'The islamists gain ground', Bouteflika or the rise of FIS', 'They have shared the terrain'. In *Le Matin* n°2851, July 11, 2001 Front page: 'Who wants the coming back of FIS?' In *Le Matin* n°2852, July 12, 2001, Front page: 'Bouteflika-FIS: the plot is getting more precise', and a full page on p 5 'The FIS of the government and the other FIS (The ex-FIS officially banned, is being rehabilitated surreptitiously without any reaction from the institutions of the state and without the public opinion being informed)'.