

After “Charlie Hebdo” & the kosher supermarket - France’s Arab population is divided by an invisible wall

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In the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, we must address France’s long war with its Arabs. Andrew Hussey reports from Paris..

On one of my first ever visits to Paris, I was confronted by a massacre, an attack on Jo Goldenberg’s deli on 9 August 1982. Goldenberg’s was at the heart of the Jewish district on the rue des Rosiers – which was a lot scruffier then than it is today. Two attackers, who have never been captured, threw grenades and fired with machine-guns into the restaurant, killing six people and injuring 22 more. The killing was attributed to the Palestinian terrorist Abu Nidal and his Black September group, but no one is certain who did it. The slaughter convulsed Paris – this was, it was said at the time, the worst attack on Jews in France since the Second World War.

I had come to Paris in the gap before starting a degree in French at Manchester. I was one of the generation of students who studied Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Les mains sales* and Albert Camus’s *Les Justes*, canonical texts about the ethics of political violence and terrorism. I did not quite understand the historical contexts of these books; that they were thinly veiled allegories about eastern Europe and Algeria respectively. But I did enjoy the classroom debates about existentialism and the philosophical limits of political action. Yet none of this helped me make any sense of the anti-Jewish terrorism that had happened half a mile or so from the tatty hotel where I was staying. In the days that followed the massacre, I read the French newspapers, listened to the radio and watched television, but all I could make out was anger and pain.

This is how most of France felt in recent days as three Islamist terrorists brought the country to its knees. The facts of what happened are simple, stark and horrifying: three attacks left 17 people dead. Four of them were Jews, shot down in a kosher supermarket in the eastern part of Paris. What is harder to describe is how everyone felt during those terrible days.

The first assault, on the editorial staff of *Charlie Hebdo*, was a gut-wrenching moment. That was because even if you didn’t read *Charlie Hebdo* – and it could be dumb, crass and boring – the journalists and cartoonists were almost like family friends to so many. This applies especially to Cabu (Jean Cabut), whose daft Beatles haircut belied a sly wit and whose sketches of Paris – published outside of *Charlie Hebdo* – were composed with a wiry elegance. Georges Wolinski, equally famous, was loved for his drawings of big-arsed women with attitude.

People had known for a long time that *Charlie Hebdo* had been sailing close to the edge with its provocative cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, and so there were bodyguards at the offices, and a general atmosphere of tension surrounded the weekly magazine. But no one could have anticipated what happened and how it would affect people; it was as if an impossible evil had taken over daily life in the city.

And then it got worse. Thursday 8 January was a good day for a funeral, with sleeting rain and dark skies. There came the news that morning, both depressing and shocking, that a policewoman had been shot and murdered in Montrouge, on the southern edge of the city. Montrouge is on the other side of the périphérique – the motorway that encircles Paris – so it is officially in the banlieue, the notorious suburbs that surround French cities.

In reality, Montrouge is more like a French provincial town, homely and friendly, with a popular public swimming pool. So it was all the more dreadful that a woman was killed during the school run.

By this stage, to be living in Paris was like being trapped in some kind of weird nightmare. The killers were on the run. Helicopters buzzed over the city day and night. Nobody could speak of anything else, and when they did talk it was in a muted way.

It was then, with the logic of a nightmare, that on 9 January we heard that a gunman had taken hostages at a kosher supermarket in eastern Paris. There had been more killings. With this latest vicious attack, the spectre of anti-Semitism, never too far away at the most violent moments in French history, had reappeared.

The game of equivalences does not really apply to terrorism – it is hard to say which attack is worse than any other: everybody suffers in similar ways. But, at least in scale, what was happening was bigger and more dramatic than even the 1982 attack on Goldenberg's deli. For one thing, it had a geopolitical significance far beyond its local Parisian impact.

I first heard of what was going on at a café in the rue de Grenelle as I stopped for a coffee before cycling to my office. This is a fairly staid part of town – mostly embassies and government offices – and as soon as I entered the bar I could see that something was wrong: the smart-suited diplomats and government officials were all standing, shouting and swearing at the television, as if this was a scruffy drinking dive showing a football match. I could just about make out the grainy and lopsided film of the assassins which has since been broadcast all over the world. "F**k!" said one of the guys at the bar. "Twelve dead! It's a catastrophe." Others joined in: "This has to be war."

The television news and newspapers later reported, as they had done after the massacre at Goldenberg's, that the attacks were the worst since the Second World War. Everybody started to believe it.

But the claim was not strictly true: the greatest loss of life on French soil since the war happened on 18 June 1961, when 28 people were killed on the Strasbourg-to-Paris train as it was derailed by a bomb. That attack was the work of the Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS), an illegal group fighting to keep the French in Algeria at the height of the war of independence, when it looked likely that President Charles de Gaulle was about to give the colony away to the nationalist forces that had been fighting the French since 1954. The OAS's campaign was in vain: the Algerians got their independence in 1962.

There is also, however, a link between the events in 1961 and 2015. More to the point, there is a case to be made that the attacks are all facets of the tortured relationship between France and Algeria. This was almost certainly not in the heads of the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly (born in France, of Malian origin) as they went about their deadly business in Paris, lost in the intoxication of murder and martyrdom. Yet without bringing the story of France and Algeria bang up to date, there is no way of understanding the twisted narrative that has led to the darkness engulfing France.

In all the recent coverage, the French media have not made much of the Franco-Algerian background of the Kouachi brothers. There are probably several good reasons for this. The French media, like nearly all French politicians, have been keen not to become entangled in what has been called "*l'amalgame*" – a confused mixture of race, religion and politics. The consensus is that this confusion is both inflammatory and entirely alien to the republican values of French universalism.

The one exception to the rule was Marine Le Pen, the leader of the Front National. It is worth remembering that Le Pen speaks to a disenfranchised white working class, many of whom have migrated to the Front from the wreckage of the Parti Communiste Français and who hate the Parisian elite. To reinforce her hardline image as the defender of the ordinary *Français de souche* (the "real" French people), Le Pen called for the return of the death penalty and the revoking of double nationality, a pointed attack on those who are perceived to be not "properly French" and, indeed, to be potential traitors or terrorists.

It was not hard to work out that this was an indirect reference to Mohamed Merah, the young Islamist assassin who, in three separate attacks, murdered three off-duty paratroopers, a 30-year-old rabbi and three small children outside a Jewish school in Toulouse in 2012. He had a Franco-Algerian background similar to that of the Kouachi brothers. In the immediate aftermath of the killings, the French government and media had sought to disassociate Merah from anti-Semitism and radical Islam. The issues were said to be unemployment and the killer's psychiatric problems.

But Merah, like many of his generation of Algerians in France, was caught between two worlds: the country where he lived and from which too often he felt excluded, and his country of origin, where he did not feel at home either. There is inevitably an existential conflict that Sartre or Camus would have recognised. Who are you? Where do you belong? What is your authentic self?

The next step in the radicalisation process is to find easy, ready-made solutions: in prison or in your home quartier, you meet an older man, a grand frère, who presents himself as an imam or a scholar of sacred texts and says that he knows the way out of the trap. He knows how the young, troubled man can find his true identity as both an Algerian and a Muslim, by waging war against the historical enemies of all Muslims. This is how the process of radicalisation begins.

The Algerian war of independence may seem far away to the present generation of young Algerians in France. However, Algeria's civil war of the 1990s is within living memory. It began in 1992 when the Algerian government refused to hand over power to the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS, the Islamic Salvation Front), which had won the parliamentary elections the previous December and seemed likely to create an "Iran on the Mediterranean". In the shadowy war fought since then between Islamists and the Algerian military, as many as 150,000 people are alleged to have been killed. No one knows the true figure.

For the Islamists, the enemy was not only the Algerian government but the French. They were seen not only as the former colonial masters, who had used torture as a weapon in the 1950s and 1960s, but also as collaborators with "*le pouvoir*" (the term the Islamists used to describe the Algerian national authorities). There were compelling rumours of French special forces' involvement in faked terrorist attacks. It was therefore the duty of Muslims, according to the FIS, to fight against Hizb Franca, the party of France.

The Algerian civil war did indeed come to France in 1994 and 1995. The first attempt to attack the French mainland began on 24 December 1994. At Algiers airport, four members of the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA, the Armed Islamic Group) managed to sneak on to an Air France flight destined for Orly. There were 240 passengers on board. The plan was to fly to Paris and crash the plane into the Eiffel Tower, but for the next two days the plane remained on the runway as the

French and Algerian governments sought a way out of the stand-off. In the end, French special forces stormed the plane on Boxing Day and shot dead the gunmen.

The violence came even closer in July 1995 when Sheikh Abdelbaki Sahraoui was killed in the rue Myrha in northern Paris. Sahraoui was in his eighties, a fluent French speaker and a founder member of the FIS. He was also a go-between for the French secret services and the GIA, which no longer heeded its elders. "We killed him because he was a democrat," declared Abu Hamza at the Finsbury Park Mosque in north London. In Algiers, Paris and London the GIA distributed tracts that showed the Eiffel Tower in flames. It began to recruit even more heavily in France, sending volunteers to train in Afghanistan.

Parisians' fears deepened on the discovery of two bomb factories in the same district of Paris. Then, just two weeks after Sahraoui's death, a bomb exploded at Saint-Michel Métro station, in the heart of the Latin Quarter. The bomb went off at the height of the rush hour on the RER line, which connects the suburbs to the city. Eight people were killed and 119 injured. That night the French nation watched images on the evening news of bodies being carried across the familiar café terraces of one of the most popular tourist spots in the world.

Three weeks later a bomb exploded near the Arc de Triomphe. No one was killed but 17 people were injured and the strain for ordinary Parisians began to show. The sense of unreality was heightened by a bizarre note, sent to the French ambassador in Algiers, calling on President Jacques Chirac to convert to Islam.

The mastermind behind the terrorist attacks of 1995 was a young man called Khaled Kelkal, a Franco-Algerian who had been brought up in Lyons. His pursuit and capture were filmed by a crew from the France 2 TV channel and his killing was shown on prime-time news. The police claimed that Kelkal had been shot in the legs.

Kelkal became a hero of the banlieue across France. This was not just because he had defied the police but because of his life story. He was born in Algeria but moved as a child to live in the suburb of Vaulx-en-Velin. At the age of 13 he joined in the first anti-police riots in Lyons: this was in 1984. By the age of 18 he was serving time in prison for robbery. There, he was befriended by an Algerian called "*Khélif*", an Islamist who had escaped prison in Algeria only to find himself locked up in France.

On his release, Kelkal began delivering guns and money from Algeria to France. He had found meaning in his life as well as excitement and glory. It was not long before he convinced himself of the need for military action against France. By chance, in 1992, he gave an interview to a German sociologist writing a thesis on France's immigrant population. "In the banlieue we are separated from France by a wall," he said, "an enormous wall."

All of this has barely been mentioned in the French media in recent days. But it has not gone unnoticed in the French-speaking press in North Africa, which has unequivocally condemned the terrorists - with some caveats and warnings. Most notably, the Algerian daily *El Watan* suggested that what France is experiencing now was part of daily life in Algeria during the 1990s. In particular, the terrorists targeted journalists and intellectuals as their enemies.

An enduring memory of one of my most recent visits to Algiers is of a conversation I had with a female university lecturer. She is a Marxist and specialist in feminism. During the 1990s her daily life was punctuated by hissed threats and throat-slitting gestures from bearded young men and by the frequent discovery of headless corpses pinned to the university gates.

I went to the march in Paris on Sunday 11 January with a heavy heart and came back feeling slightly better. It was impressive to see a whole city on the move again; during the attacks, people had stayed away from the Métro and the streets had been unusually quiet. In the hour or so before the march, hundreds of thousands of people were once again coursing through the arteries of Paris, bringing it alive. Without wishing to make it seem too much like a Richard Curtis movie, it was heartening to see all ages, races and personalities mingling. I particularly liked the guy parading around with a big brown pencil in his over-the-top “French beret”. There were smiles, people were kind to those in wheelchairs, and strangers talked to one another.

Most importantly, I witnessed no overt displays of nationalism. At first I thought it had been a mistake to exclude Marine Le Pen and the FN – it is, after all, a legitimate and popular party. But the overall effect was to make the atmosphere more relaxed. There were Muslim faces, all welcomed and applauded. It is one of the invisible details of being a Parisian that interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims is an essential component of everyday life in offices, shops and cafés. More to the point, the Islam practised by most North Africans is of the Maliki school, a gentle, popular tradition that could not be more at odds with the puritanical fanaticism of the killers. I am glad that the march took place, but it will take a long time for this wounded city to recover. For now, the healing has begun.

Yet the ghosts of French history – and of French and Algerian history, in particular – are still very much present. Although the level of violence gets worse, from 1995 to 2012 to 2015, it feels as if there is nothing new in Islamist terror: variations of the same thing keep happening over and over again. It is 32 years since my first encounter with terror at Goldenberg’s deli. In the intervening period, I have researched and travelled widely in what was French North Africa (Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria), trying to work out the complicated love-hate relationship between France and its former Muslim territories. Very quickly, after this month’s killings, I grew tired of the media arguments about censorship, the ignorant statements about Islam and the misunderstanding about the French-speaking world.

There are no easy answers; but what is certain is that the same political and cultural problems are being handed down from generation to generation. For all these reasons, much as we all wanted it to be the case at the march on Sunday, it’s not yet over.

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P.S.

* <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/01/frances-arab-population-divided-invisible-wall>

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