Stand and Be Counted – Samuel Paty's decapitation in France and Algerian experience

Monday 19 October 2020, by [HELIE LUCAS Marieme](#) (Date first published: 19 October 2020).

Marieme Helie Lucas, an Algerian sociologist and freedom fighter, founder of the solidarity networks Women Living Under Muslim Laws, and Secularism is a Women's Issue argues that the roots of the murder of Samuel Paty go back to the 1990s and the experience of Algerians in the 'war against civilians'. She argues that we should 'Stand and Be Counted'.

Assassinations by decapitation or by the sword – which are highly symbolic of all Muslim extreme right organisations (Al Quaeda, the Taliban, GIA, Shabab, Daesh, Boko Haram, etc...) – are not a new phenomenon in France. Several cases have already happened in recent years. It points at the will of the sponsor to not just 'execute' the victim for his 'crimes', but also to send a chill down the spines of potential next victims, – in this present case anyone who will dare re-publish the 'drawings of Mohammed'. This is why filming decapitations or taking a photograph of French teacher Samuel Paty's head severed from his body is a crucial step. Who will dare teach freedom of speech in French schools after the mid-term holidays? Stand and be counted...

In Algeria too, long before the 'bloody nineties' and the 'war against civilians' as we called it then, we too witnessed some such public terrifying Islamist war crimes: the first 'execution', in the early seventies, was a communist student, who faced an ad-hoc Islamist Tribunal inside the premises of Algiers University where I taught at that time, and was 'executed' by the sword then and there.

For it is important to understand that the same scenario which developed in Algeria right after independence and culminated in the nineties is being replicated in Europe: gradually, there was fundamentalist control taking place over women, their dress, their behaviour, their space for choice, etc; there was 'Islamic punishment', as they call it, for 'kofr' (unbelievers) – generally death penalty – or for 'un-Islamic behavior' such as smoking, drinking, not praying 5 times a day, not fasting during Ramzan/ Ramadan, etc...

But who cared for a bunch of women who did not conform, for drunkards or for gays and for unbelievers? The State certainly was not about to endanger 'social peace' for these un-important citizens. The French State did not do any better, when the first victims on its soil were young women or isolated intellectuals, decades before the assassination of a teacher that took place a couple of days ago. And France has, so far, not learnt from what followed suit in Algeria.

For three decades from the 60s to the 80s, violence in Algeria mounted, until by the 90s fundamentalists deemed 'Kofr' any citizen who had anything to do with the 'kofr state', such as, for instance, sending children to school, getting treatment in government hospitals, or going to any government office for an identity document, etc. For all the critics of the government at that time, , let me remind readers that, in Algeria, education was totally free for boys and girls alike, and so was

access to hospitals to all citizens. (Not many European or North American countries could say the same, when poor people still die at the doorstep of hospitals, for lack of resources to pay for their treatment.) In other words, in Algeria, not having anything to do with the 'kofr state' was a fundamentalist command that was impossible to comply with, in a country where everything was controlled by the state. The number of victims that received their 'punishment' from extreme right Islamist armed groups skyrocketed; the estimated number is 200,000 victims in the decade of the nineties.

In France, Algerian refugees from the nineties, who had already lived through this whole process, kept warning about similar developments in France. We were never heard. Moreover, we were deemed anti-Islam, as if armed Islamist groups were the sole true representatives of Islam; or we were deemed henchmen of the Algerian government, when most of us had already been persecuted by the State for being part of the progressive opposition.

International human rights organisations were at the forefront for welcoming Islamists as the victims of the State and shunning us as 'Islamophobic' – a concept quickly coined by the Muslim extreme right, which has now spread worldwide. Human rights organisations will carry the stigma for their inhuman political choice: I am convinced that history will judge.

During the nineties, when ordinary people tried to flee Islamist extreme right violence, they were denied visas to France on the ground that they were not persecuted by the government but by non-state actors. We all bitterly remember that and maintained full files about it – while prominent Islamists, some of them with blood on their hands, were welcomed as political refugees everywhere in Europe and North America.

In a way, France's deliberate policy of welcoming far right Islamist opponents to the Algerian State now bears fruit. They now have developed into a full political force within France, that shows muscle in order to bend laws and democratic principles to their own theocratic ideology.

Since the nineties, there were many warning signs in France of the rise of a Muslim extreme right (as is clearly the case in the UK, as well as in other European countries); for instance: various attempts by Muslim fundamentalists to change laws, or cultural habits: for instance an attempt to have a clause on the virginity of the bride included in the law as a precondition of the validity of a marriage; several attempts to legalize the total separation of sexes (in education, in hospitals, in swimming pools, etc…); several attempts to change the curriculum in schools (no art class, no gym for girls, no biology classes unless creationism was taught instead of Darwinism, etc…). Within France, many girls and young women were assaulted and some of them killed since the nineties, for 'un-Islamic behavior'.

Such warning signs were ignored, despite attempts by anti-fundamentalist Algerian refugees to alert the authorities and the media, and human rights organisations as well. In vain.

Interestingly, progressive people and human rights organisations in Europe explain the crimes and violations committed by the Muslim extreme right by the racism they face in Europe. (In the case of *Charlie Hebdo*'s journalists and cartoonists, many on the left and within human rights circles actually justify the killings, shamelessly declaring that they deserved their fate for insulting 'Muslims'.) Indeed there is racism in France (or in the UK for that matter) and there is clear discrimination at the level of housing and employment; but there are also anti-racist organisations to defend the victims. And the state itself is not racist: there are no discriminatory laws (free education and health benefit all). Discriminatory practices which, of course, unfortunately exist at the level of individuals, are condemned in courts. This is more than what we can offer to foreigners in our own countries of origin, as can be seen with the waves of migrants being terribly ill treated when, on

their way to Europe, they cross the North of Africa – where being black is still equated with being a sub-human.

In many ways, we are privileged, those of us coming from so-called Muslim countries: we are spared the justification of the Muslim extreme right's crimes through racism, and we know for sure that religion per se is not at stake. Take Algeria, where virtually 99% people are officially declared Muslims by virtue of being born in a Muslim majority country, in a Muslim family; where ethnicity (Arab only, till recently), religion (Islam) and citizenship (Algerian) are conflated and virtually synonymous. Like in other countries in South Asia, Middle East or Sub Saharan Africa, it is 'Muslims' killing 'Muslims '. Religion is the cover up for extreme right political forces; like nazis with the Aryan 'race', the Muslim extreme right believes they belong to the upper religion in the world; like Italian fascists invoking the Glorious Past of Rome, they justify their self-proclaimed highest status with reference to a mythified past: the Golden Age of Islam. Like fascists and nazis, they believe this superiority grants them the right and the duty to physically eliminate the *untermensch* (the sub-humans), which, strangely enough – seem quite similar, from WWII to now: Jews and other 'inferior races', communists, etc… to which our home brand of fascists and nazis add the *Kofrs*. Among many other similarities, they all assign women to their place: the kitchen, the cradle and the Church/in our case, the mosque.

One of the many problems in the analysis of crimes such as the one committed day before yesterday in France against a history teacher, whose only crime was to teach the official curriculum on freedom of expression, is the lack of an adequate vocabulary to name the perpetrators. We need to qualify them in political terms, not in religious ones as is currently done in France.

The crimes and violations we witnessed in Algeria during the nineties, which are still currently perpetrated today in so many predominantly 'Muslim' countries, could not possibly be defined as perpetrated by 'Muslims' in our contexts; we were forced to identify them as political forces of the extreme right.

Naming these political forces is essential. This is the conceptual blessing I wish for France and for Europe, if we don't want to face here as we did in Algeria, another 'war against the civilians'. That is why I say, we have to stand up and be counted, now.

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P.S.

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