

Algeria twenty years on: words do not die

Monday 24 June 2013, by [BENNOUNE Karima](#) (Date first published: 24 June 2013).

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the Algerian jihadists war on culture. Those who waged the intellectual struggle against fundamentalism in Algeria throughout the 1990s received little support internationally. Karima Bennoune pays tribute to those who fell in the culturicide, and warns of the urgent need to remember

My father, Algerian anthropologist Mahfoud Bennoune called these systematic 1990s killings of intellectuals by the country's fundamentalist armed groups a genocide. A law student then, I explained to him that the UN Genocide Convention did not protect political or social groups. But in my research about the unrelenting assault on Algeria's intelligentsia that began in early 1993, I have come to understand my father's use of the term. This was indeed an attempt by the radical Islamists battling the Algerian state to stamp out the North African nation's culture and to wipe out those who shaped it. It was, as Algerian writer and artist Mustapha Benfodil describes it, an "intellectocide." Benfodil, whose most recent installation, "Headless," memorialized these assassinations, argues that "never, to my knowledge, have so many intellectuals been killed in so little time."

On May 26, 1993, one of Algeria's greatest writers, Tahar Djaout, was gunned down leaving his apartment in Bainem, a Western suburb of the capital Algiers where I lived as a child. The country reeled. Djaout, a Berber who wrote in French and had studied mathematics, who had penned numerous novels and volumes of poetry, founded the publication *Ruptures*, and been an eloquent critic of both the country's government and its vicious fundamentalists, died a week later after lingering in a coma. "Algiers thinks about the corpse in its arms," wrote J.E.B. on May 31 in a poem published in *Ruptures*. During those seven days, we waited to see if Djaout, and we ourselves, would awaken from this new nightmare; he never did, and the country would not for ten long years. "Tahar was assassinated by the inquisition," proclaimed a headline in *Ruptures* after his death on June 2.

The anniversary of this tragedy was recently commemorated by a somber colloquium in Algiers organized by the newspaper *El Watan* (The Nation) on June 1, entitled "Presence(s) of Djaout." (*El Watan* director Omar Belhouchet himself survived a 1993 assassination attempt by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).) As the poet Amine Khene said at the paper's memorial colloquium, Tahar Djaout's murder "was an assassination of Algeria and its future. Djaout was among that minority of intellectuals who could have formed the kernel of a democratic alternative."

Back in 1993, thirteen days after Djaout's passing, one of Africa's leading psychiatrists, the erudite Dr. Mahfoud Boucebsi, another figure in a potential "democratic alternative," was in the sights of obscurantist assassins. On the morning of Tuesday June 15, 1993, the 57 year-old vice president of the International Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry was knifed at the entrance to his Algiers hospital. Boucebsi had written pioneering works about single mothers, and won the Maghreb Prize for Medicine. In a 1991 interview, he described the fundamentalist takeover of Mustapha Hospital in Algiers. "I felt infinite pain in seeing these young men who thought they were all powerful and had suddenly become super-chiefs, and could command and humiliate a doctor." Anouar Haddam, the loathsome spokesman of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) who found refuge in the United States, said that Boucebsi's killing was "not a crime but the execution of a sentence."

The next theocratic “sentence” was carried out one week later on the morning of Tuesday June 22, almost exactly twenty years ago. Mohamed Boukhobza, 52, a prominent sociologist and the director of the National Institute for Global Strategic Studies, was tied up and had his throat cut in front of his daughter in the Telemly neighbourhood in Algiers. I came home that day to my father’s apartment on the outskirts of the city to find him angrier than I could ever remember seeing him over the murder of his former university colleague.

On Tuesday June 29, 1993, exactly one week later, I woke up early to an unrelenting pounding on the sturdy metal front door my father had recently installed. By then, as *El Watan* later described it, “every Tuesday a scholar fell to the bullets of... fundamentalist assassins.” Mahfoud Bennoune was a politically outspoken professor whose anthropology class - in which he dared teach Darwin - had already been visited by the head of the FIS who had denounced him as an advocate of “biologism,” until - as a former student in that class recently reminded me - Dad had ejected the man. On June 29, 1993, whoever was pounding on our door would neither identify himself nor go away. My father tried repeatedly to get the police on the telephone. Perhaps terrified themselves by the rising tide of armed extremism that had already claimed the lives of many Algerian officers, the local police station did not even answer. However, we were lucky that day. The unwanted and unidentified visitors eventually departed. We never knew why, or exactly who they were. Someone would return a few months later, leaving a note on the kitchen table. “Consider yourself dead.” They wrote “death to” before our name on the mailbox.

Subsequently, Algerian fundamentalists would post Mahfoud Bennoune’s name on lists of those to be killed in extremist-controlled mosques in Algiers, along with the names of so many others - journalists, intellectuals, trade unionists, women’s rights activists. They would murder more of my father’s colleagues, his friends and relatives, and as many as 200,000 Algerians in what came to be known as “the dark decade.” No matter how awful things became, the international community largely ignored these events. The world would leave all those victims of fundamentalism to fend for themselves.

Finally, my father would be forced to flee his apartment and to give up teaching at the University. That was when I came to understand that the struggle against Muslim fundamentalism and terrorism waged by countless people of Muslim heritage in many countries is one of the most important - and overlooked - human rights struggles in the world. Sadly, this is even truer now twenty years later.

The intellectuals who were killed first by extremists in Algeria were mainly those who had most quickly and clearly understood the nature of the beast. My father’s friend Salah Chouaki, a leftwing school inspector and esteemed education reformer, had warned in one of the last articles he published before being gunned down on September 14, 1994 by the GIA that “the most dangerous and deadly illusion... is to underestimate fundamentalism, the mortal enemy of our people.”

Published after his death, Tahar Djaout’s final book, *The Last Summer of Reason* - Algeria’s “1984” - describes the rise of extremism in chilling detail, and projects what the country would look like if the fundamentalists took over - by elections or by force. In Djaout’s theocratic hell, roadblocks catch inappropriately garbed women. Young men are brainwashed against their more liberal fathers. Minds are closed, families destroyed. But some refuse to submit.

The novel’s hero, Boualem Yekker - whose family name means “stood up or awoke” in Tamazight (Berber) - is a free-thinking book seller. As Djaout described Yekker, “[he] was one of those who had decided to resist, those who had become aware that when the hordes confronting them had managed to spread their fear and impose silence they would have won.” Djaout himself, Boucebsi, Boukhobza, Chouaki and many of the other targeted intellectuals were like Boualem Yekker, and

their murders were meant to quash their resistance, and silence its expression. Yet, others continued to stand up. Even when my father was driven from his home, he remained in the country, and continued to publish pointed criticisms of both the armed fundamentalists and the government they battled. In a three part series published in *El Watan* in November 1994, called "How Fundamentalism produced a terrorism without precedent," he denounced the terrorists' "radical break with true Islam as it was lived by our ancestors."

The leftwing women's group RAFD (refuse) was born after the funeral of one of the slain scholars, and its members took to the streets with their heads uncovered, carrying photos of the dead and wearing cloth targets in protest. Their philosophy was rather like Djaout's. "If you speak out, they will kill you. If you keep silent, they will kill you. So speak out, and die."

Those who waged the intellectual struggle against fundamentalism in Algeria in the early nineties, who spoke out and died - or lived - received almost no support internationally. Algerian psychologist and women's rights advocate Cherifa Bouatta says there is still tremendous anger at those internationally who could have been the allies of progressive anti-fundamentalists but were not. "No one said, 'we are with you.'" Moreover, governments like that of the U.S. and Britain had only made things worse by pumping money into the anti-Soviet jihad in faraway Afghanistan which had a direct effect on Algeria; the worst killers in the 90s conflict were known as "Afghans" for their experience as foreign fighters in that "jihad."

The Algerian state killed too, though in far smaller numbers, used widespread torture against terror suspects, and disappeared as many as 8,000 people, but the conflict in the nineties was primarily about the fundamentalist assault on Algerian society. Moreover, the intellectuals targeted by the fundamentalist armed groups tended to be fiercely independent figures who were both critics of the state and extremism.

Back then, the wave of fundamentalist blood-letting among people of letters began in March 1993, with the shooting of Djilali Liabes, a sociologist and former Education Minister whom my father had described as "one of the most dedicated educators of his generation," the knifing of doctor turned novelist Laadi Flici, and the murder of political scientist Hafid Senhadri. After the June slaughter of Djaout and the others, a lengthy wave of killings of journalists and press workers commenced in August 1993 with the slaying of Arabophone television reporter Rabah Zenati. Over the next few years, editors-in-chief like Omar Ouartilane who directed the Arabic-language paper *El Khabar*, prominent columnists like the inimitable Saïd Mekbel, journalists like Naima Hamaouda of *Révolution Africaine*, and even technical staff like *Le Soir d'Algérie's* copy editor Yasmine Drissi were all "eliminated."

FIS spokesman Anouar Haddam openly told the French newspaper *Libération* that they had suggested to their "brother jihadists" to target journalists amongst others. When assassinations were not deemed sufficient to root out the journo-menace, the Islamists blew up newspaper offices repeatedly, killing people like poetry-loving *Le Soir* culture editor Allaoua Aït Mebarek, and columnist Mohamed Dorbane who had just finished his grocery shopping for Ramadan supper. A total of 100 press workers, including 60 journalists, were killed by the fundamentalist armed groups between 1993 and 1997, according to *El Watan* scribe Ahmed Ancer's appropriately titled book, *Red Ink*.

Many journalists had to leave their homes as a result. Rachida Hammadi, 32, a serious TV correspondent I had met at a Ramadan dinner in her safe-house went home to be with her family for one night. As she departed at dawn on March 20, 1995, a car full of armed fundamentalists waited. One opened fire with an automatic weapon. His bullets hit Rachida and her sister Meriem who tried to protect her. Both died in the hospital.

The fundamentalist armed groups' assault on knowledge and the learned hit many professional categories. They killed lawyers like Leila Kheddar who was shot at home in front of her family, and Human Rights League President Youssef Fathallah who was gunned down in his office. They killed judges like Lakhdar Rouaz, and even law students who refused to give up their studies like 22 year-old Amel Zenoune-Zouani. They killed economists like Abderrahmane Fardeheb, teachers (often in front of their classes) like 33 year-old Abdelaziz Chelighem, and women school principals like Meziane Zhor, 54. They slaughtered female students like Naima Kar Ali, 19, and Raziqa Meloudjemi, 18, who dared to bare their heads.

They took out Algeria's leading sign language specialist Nacer Ouari who had recently returned from the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the country's foremost pediatrician, anti-torture activist Dr. Djilali Belkhenchir. They were interdisciplinary, killing both the dean of the School of Fine Arts Ahmed Asselah, and Salah Djebaïli, the rector of the Faculty of Science, during the spring of 1994. Not long before his death, Djabaïli said, "It is exactly the time to diagnose the problems and do things differently. It's now or never, while there are no taboos." As Professor Fardeheb's daughter Amel wrote about her slain father in a plea for these murders not to be forgotten, "Do they know how much you loved your country? Do they know that you wanted the best for the youth of Algeria?" To kill people of this level of education, skill, promise and commitment in a developing country that had only been independent for thirty years - and so many more of them than can be mentioned in this article - was tantamount to trying to kill the country itself.

Some 71,500 university graduates reportedly fled the fundamentalist onslaught between 1992 and 1996 alone, a brain drain whose consequences continue to be felt today. While the much larger number of killings of ordinary people in Algeria must also be commemorated, and all are equally important in human terms, these killings aimed a knife at the throat of the entire society. Each murder had many, many victims.

To honour those intellectuals who fell to fundamentalism in Algeria two decades ago, we have to listen to and support - or at least notice - the Boualem Yekkers of today. They are still out there, from Afghanistan to Mali to Turkey's Taksim Square, peacefully standing up to extremism, often alone and without international support or publicity. They continue to speak their minds, sometimes on pain of death. In north-west Pakistan, thousands of intellectuals and political activists have been slaughtered by militants over the last decade, a pattern of devastation that provokes nowhere near the outcry from progressives in the West as that caused by drone attacks. I think of Zarteef Afridi, a teacher in Jamrud, Kyber Agency who campaigned for the franchise of tribal women and organized elders against terrorism, and was gunned down walking to his school on December 8, 2011. As his friend Salman Rashid wrote of him "He stood for the liberation of the human soul through education and enlightenment."

Even Tunisia, birthplace of the Arab Spring, has now seen the first fundamentalist assassination of an intellectual, the leftist lawyer Chokri Belaïd who was mowed down in February of this year, a man who like the early martyred Algerians, could see the danger rising Islamism poses to his country and appealed to his fellow citizens to confront it. Sacrifices like these must be remembered.

I write this article to pay tribute to those who fell in the Algerian jihadists war on culture twenty years ago, and to say to their families, and their colleagues who continue their work, that progressives elsewhere will not forget them. Though men and women may be gunned down, words do not die, and I continue to learn from their words every day. They taught that one must be entirely lucid and unwavering in one's critique of the extreme right, wherever one lives, and that those who battle it armed only with a pen or a voice need support.

"Those who fight us with a pen should die by the sword," ordered Algeria's Armed Islamic Group in

1992, according to Ancer's *Red Ink*. "Pen against Kalashnikov. Is there a more unequal struggle?," Ghania Oukazi had asked on the night her newspaper's offices were bombed by the GIA in Algiers, back in 1996. She and her fellow journalists had huddled in the ruins of their building to get out the next day's papers no matter what. As her signed piece in that heroic February 12, 1996 edition concluded: "What is certain is that the pen will not stop..."

Courage like this demands solidarity and deserves to be recorded. "We will not be deserving of your sacrifice," Cherifa Kheddar wrote last week in an open letter to her lawyer sister Leila who was killed by the GIA seventeen years ago today, on June 24, 1996, "if we do not take a moment to honor your memory, and by doing so to also remember your sacrifice for a modern Algeria that moves forward and does not regress."

Today, twenty years later, there is an urgent need to remember - and learn from - what happened in Algeria's dark decade. First and foremost, these events should remind us that people of Muslim heritage - especially those on the left - have always been the most frequent targets of Muslim fundamentalists - and their most important opponents.

Fundamentalism is on the rise now from Yemen to Tunisia and beyond. An outspoken Tunisian college professor recently told me how terrified she is since Belaid's assassination, and how she has changed her daily movements to protect herself. Algeria's experience should serve as a warning today about how dangerous such developments are, and help identify the best way to combat that danger. In an article entitled "Compromise with Political Islam is Impossible" - which is as relevant today as when it was penned in 1993, a year before its author's assassination - Salah Chouaki explained that "[t]he best way to defend Islam is to put it out of the reach of all political manipulation.... The best way to defend the modern state is to put it out of the reach of all exploitation of religion for political ends."

What happened in Algeria twenty years ago shows that the challenge to local cultures and ways of life posed by fundamentalism is actually existential. It is no accident that the last words of Tahar Djaout's last work ask a question. "Will there be another spring?"

Karima Bennoune

P.S.

* <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/karima-bennoune/algeria-twenty-years-on-words-do-not-die>

* An interview with the author, conducted by Deniz Kandiyoti, about her forthcoming book *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism*, will be published on 5050 in August.