

Does the History of the Algerian Coup Offer Clues to What Egypt May Expect ?

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Sommaire

- [The « Green Peril »](#)
- [Desperately Seeking Legitimacy](#)
- [Le Pouvoir](#)
- [Terrorizing the Terrorists](#)
- [Propaganda War](#)

Twenty-two years ago on January 11, Algeria's brief flirtation with democracy came to a screaming halt, opening the gate to a bloody civil war.

Today, that conflict tends to be viewed through an Islamist-versus-secularist lens, but there were many caught in the crossfire who were opposed to both the military and the Islamist movement. On another level, the Algerian conflict also can be viewed as a no-holds-barred battle between those who opposed the system and those who fought to keep it in place.

For many Algerian liberals, as they explicitly argued at the time, the military was using the « Green Peril » as an excuse to wage a broader psychological war to kill the aspirations of democracy, freedom and social justice of an entire generation.

« When you have to worry if you will even come home in the evening alive, you stop caring about political change, » says Meziani Brahim, a member of Parliament for Algeria's oldest opposition party, the secularist Socialist Forces Front (FFS).

« They managed, in a way, to discredit democracy itself. The coup legitimized the violence by the FIS [Islamist party], » says Brahim, who was an 18-year-old law student when the military took over. « In the end, it all only served the interests of the system. »

No one knows how many were killed during Algeria's « black decade, » but estimates range from 150,000 to 200,000 - including 20,000 forcibly disappeared.

« I'm afraid for Egypt, because the biggest losers will be the Egyptian people, » Brahim says.

It is no accident that Algerians today, however much they despise Le Pouvoir, as the shadowy generals who hold the real power are known, are terrified of political change. And this is the strategy of the Egyptian generals, too : ensure that their people learn never to dare to rise up again.

In 2008, I was in Algiers on the anniversary of the October 1988 massacre. A crowd of about 100 people gathered at a commemorative event to lay flowers in memory of the slain protesters. The mood was subdued, the wound raw. It was an act of mourning for what might have been.

People were all too aware of the plainclothes police officers who must have been in our midst and

the fact that public gatherings of that type had been illegal since January 1992.

Yet even among democratic activists, Algerians I spoke with in early 2011 were deeply cynical about what was happening in Tunisia and Egypt.

« They will learn the hard way, » was the typical reaction.

Among some currents of political Islam, the Algerian conflict has led to a certain pragmatic rejection of violence. Already, the Muslim Brotherhood has been more savvy than the FIS ever was in its awareness of how violence might alienate its supporters and international opinion.

« I know that the leaders of the Brotherhood are struggling to keep their youth under control, » noted D^r. Abbas Aroua, an Algerian health physicist and political activist based in Switzerland who is a member of the neo-Islamist Rachad movement. Some of Rachad's leaders, mostly based in Europe, formerly were FIS members. « They know that the recourse to armed action will benefit only the putschist regime. »

The Muslim Brotherhood, with 60 years of history and a much more coherent organizational structure, is a very different movement from the Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). The FIS was a largely Algerian phenomenon with no firm foreign allies, whereas today, Islamist parties are part of the political scene in multiple countries.

Interestingly, while the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters have adopted a simplistic narrative that 1992 was a crime against political Islam as a whole, this is a rather revisionist version of history. The Algerian branch of the Muslim Party, known as Hamas in the 1990s, sided with the regime against the FIS and actively began casting itself as the « moderate » - and, crucially to the Le Pouvoir, much less popular - option.

If the FIS had not been wiped out by the Algerian regime, the Muslim Brotherhood arguably wouldn't enjoy its status today as the hegemonic current of political Islam. The Egyptian movement has a degree of political shrewdness and geostrategic awareness that the FIS never demonstrated.

The « Green Peril »

On October 5, 1988, Gen. Khaled Nezzar sent in the tanks to crush protests against the rising cost of living and political stagnation. Hundreds of protesters were killed. The regime was seriously discredited by the bloodshed, and the reformists within the ranks of the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) gained the upper hand.

Suddenly, there were independent media and opposition parties. Algeria was heading to its first multiparty elections since independence. Change was in the air, or so it seemed. Then came the dizzying rise of the Islamists.

The FIS won 54 percent of the vote in the June 1990 municipal elections, the country's first vote since independence. In December 1991, the Islamists took 188 of 231 seats in the first round of the legislative elections. The FFS came a distant second with 25 seats, while the FLN took just 15.

There was a growing concern among some secularists that the FIS would not settle for control of the Parliament and that Algeria would become the next Iran. Other secularists, however, reasoned that since the presidency was still held by the FLN's Chadli Bendjedid, the constitution would limit the FIS's ability to take over state institutions.

On January 2, hundreds of thousands of Algerians marched chanting « Neither police state nor fundamentalist state, » rejecting what they argued was a false binary choice.

« We wanted to give Algerians an alternative, » says Brahim, who participated in the march.

The march was led by Hocine Ait Ahmed, one of the historic leaders of the National Liberation Front (FLN). It was Ait Ahmed who had created the FLN's paramilitary wing in 1947, beginning the armed struggle against the French that was to become the War of Independence.

Ait Ahmed had quit the part at the dawn of independence, denouncing what he considered the FLN's dangerous drift into violent infighting and quest to impose single-party authoritarianism.

He had founded the FFS in 1963, but it was only after October 1988 that the party was able to begin participating in Algerian political life.

« The die are not yet cast ; there is still hope. Democracy is not lost ; democracy is not lost, » Ait Ahmed told the crowd in 1992.

The Islamists' popularity, Ait Ahmed reassured them, did not mean democracy would inevitably be a one-way street allowing the FIS to obtain absolute power. He believed the generals were using the FIS as a bogeyman to undermine the country's democratic transition.

To the dismay of its organizers, the generals seized their opportunity, arguing that the protest had popular support to interrupt the democratic process. Bendjedid was pressured to resign by General Khaled Nezzar, who unconvincingly accused him of plotting with the FIS.

The generals dissolved the sitting parliament and replaced the government with a High Security Council. Ait Ahmed immediately denounced the body as being anti-constitutional.

« I say that with the interruption of the electoral process, they have played the game of the fundamentalists by discrediting democracy. Already [the FIS supporters] are beginning to use the interruption of the second round of the elections to say, 'You see where democracy leads ?' » he told France 3 television the day after.

The coup was not only a blow to Islamists but also against secular democrats, including the many reformists who had been pushing for change within the regime since the early 1980s. Bendjedid, whose political and economic reforms were viewed by the generals as an assault on their core interests, was to be held under house arrest until 1999.

Desperately Seeking Legitimacy

General Nezzar desperately needed to give legitimacy to his High Security Council, so he turned to two of the FLN's founding figures. Ait Ahmed, his first choice for president, flatly rejected the general's overtures.

Mohamed Boudiaf, who had lived in exile in Morocco since independence, went against Ait Ahmed's advice and accepted.

The generals quickly discovered, however, that they had another reformist on their hands. Boudiaf was even more disruptive than Bendjedid. To the generals' dismay, he wouldn't let the elections issue drop. He began to question their violent campaign against the FIS. He launched an investigation into high-level corruption and publically denounced the « political-financial mafia. »

Boudiaf became wildly popular with the Algerian people.

Six short months into his presidency, Boudiaf was assassinated live on television by a member of the presidential guard. The country went into shock. Officially, the gunman was a sole actor, motivated by alleged Islamist sympathies.

Boudiaf's friends and family members, along with Algerian rights activists, rejected this explanation and called for an investigation.

Even Hubert Vedrine, diplomatic advisor to France's President François Mitterrand and later foreign minister, openly expressed skepticism.

« It seemed very clear to us that he was assassinated because he wanted to radically change the political system, » Vedrine said in documentary aired in 1999 by the French documentary channel ARTE.

Algeria was about to enter some of the darkest years in its history. Stripped of the fig leaf of a figure from the independence movement, from this point onward, the generals' legitimacy lay solely in the public's fear of the Islamists.

Le Pouvoir

There were two very powerful forces who were opposed to both the FIS and the reformists. Key figures within the military and the secret services were determined to undermine Algeria's democratic transition to maintain their tight grip on Algerian political and economic life.

The « éradicateurs » wanted to provoke an Islamist uprising, to legitimize a war of annihilation against the FIS's political leadership and support base. The eradication strategy was ironically a cut-and-paste copy of the strategy used by the French against Algeria's independence movement.

Indeed, the leading generals in the éradicateur camp, including Larbi Belkheir, Khaled Nezzar, Mohamed Lamari and Mohamed Touati, had all served in the French army against their FLN compatriots, defecting on the eve of independence.

The Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS), meanwhile, was modeled on the Soviet Union's KGB. It had years of experience infiltrating, creating internal divisions within opposition movements and political assassinations, and would use these methods to full effect throughout the Dirty War.

As Ait Ahmed once explained to me, the Algerian regime is what the Soviet Union would have looked like if the KGB had had an absolutely monopoly on executive power.

Before being forced from power, Bendjedid had dared to attempt to restrict the DRS's domestic surveillance activities. Nezzar fought back, appointing the shadowy and all-powerful Gen. Mohamed Mediène, Toukif by his pseudonym, at the head of the DRS in 1990, a position he retains to this day.

Terrorizing the Terrorists

When Habib Souaidia graduated from one of Algeria's top military schools in 1991, he thought he was about to embark on a promising career in the armed forces.

The second-lieutenant was not particularly political at that time but was an idealist with a strong belief in republican values. He was not a supporter of the FIS and initially believed that the security forces were doing the right thing to « save » the country.

What he experienced in the years that followed, however, soon led him to denounce the generals' strategy of « terrorizing the terrorists. » The generals' definition of terrorists, as Souaidia wrote in his best-selling and controversial 2000 book, *The Dirty War*, included the 3 million Algerians who had voted for the FIS.

What was the worst thing he saw during those dark years ?

« Abducting children, women, men. ... when you abduct a child, torture him, burn him alive, because he supports Islamists or he's simply the son of an Islamist, » he said, his voice trailing off.

First, thousands of FIS supporters were rounded up and sent to detention camps in the Sahara Desert, while others fled into exile. Then, security forces began to inflict collective punishment on villages that had dared to support the FIS at the first round of voting at the ballot box.

The strategy was as counterproductive as it was brutal, Souaidia argues. Tens of thousands of young men fled to the mountains, quickly swelling the ranks of the newly formed armed groups.

It was in March 1993 that Souaidia first witnessed the massacre of civilians by members of security forces, near the pro-FIS village of Douar Ez-Zaatria. The next day, the media dutifully reported that Islamists were the ones responsible for the killings, he says.

As a member of Gen. Lamari's elite anti-subversion force, Souaidia was next deployed to the town of Lakhdaria, in the heart of the region southeast of Algiers that came to be known as the « triangle of death. » Support for the FIS had been strong in this rural area, and they would pay for it.

In February 1994, the town's former mayor, a member of the FIS who had been elected in the June 1990 local elections, was tortured over a period of two weeks before being executed, Souaidia alleges.

The FIS was a young and loosely knit party that brought together a range of different factions. From day one, however, it had been heavily infiltrated by the DRS. Its leaders were imprisoned or forced into exile, and its membership fractured under the repression.

Souaidia, who has lived as a political refugee in France since 2000, warns that the Egyptian state is following a similar strategy.

« The problem is, the Egyptians are following to the letter what the Algerians did. It begins with unknown groups who begin to set off bombs left and right, » he says. « They are pushing people to take up arms. »

Some of the FIS's more hardline members broke off to join the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), many of whom would soon be killed by the GIA itself. By 1994, the GIA had declared open war on the FIS and on the Islamic Salvation Army (AIG), the FIS's official armed wing, which it condemned as being too moderate.

While the links between the armed groups and the FIS political leadership is contested, some would come to recognize that they had allowed their base to resort to violence.

It was a world where soldiers disguised themselves as Islamists and Islamists disguised themselves

as soldiers. Soldiers remained in their barracks even as mysterious bearded men went on murdering and raping sprees in their vicinity. Civilians were tortured for weeks and their bodies thrown from helicopters or buried in mass graves. Pregnant women were disemboweled. Confusion and violence reigned.

The GIA was opposed to dialogue, curiously echoing the éradicateurs' stance. As the FIS attempted to negotiate with the government and to lobby for international support abroad, the GIA embarked on a series of increasingly horrific massacres of civilians.

The FIS, meanwhile, would linger in exile for a few more years but had been forever purged from Algerian political life. The generals ushered in what opposition parties denounce as « façade democracy. » The éradicateurs' strategy was a success.

Propaganda War

During some of the worst years of the Algerian conflict, foreign journalists fled the spiraling violence or were denied visas. What happened in Algeria stayed in Algeria. It was not until 1997 that international pressure finally forced the regime to allow foreign journalists back in to the country to investigate the allegations that security services were behind some of the worst massacres. Algeria was a virtual black hole.

In the age of widespread citizen journalism, Skype and cellphones, not to mention pan-Arab news stations, the Egyptian regime will have a much harder time imposing a media blackout.

Many Algerian journalists willingly became part of the regime's propaganda apparatus. Algerian journalist Sid Ahmed Semiane wrote a scathing indictment of his former colleagues in his 2005 book, accusing many journalists of having unquestioningly applauded the security forces' violent tactics.

« I saw journalists publish fake statements - written with care by their friends in the secret services in block letters - attributed the next day directly to the Islamists of the GIA, even though they knew they were fake statements, » he writes in *Au Refuge des Balles Perdues*.

The media's overwhelming support of the security forces can, in part, be understood by the fact that Algeria had become an extremely dangerous place for journalists and intellectuals, especially subversive ones. It was the second-most-deadly conflict for journalists of the past 25 years, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

« Silence is death. And you - if you keep quiet, you die ; and if you speak, you die. So speak and die ! » Tahar Djaout, a legendary writer and journalist, said.

His fatalism was well-placed, and became emblematic of the many outspoken intellectuals who found themselves under attack from both Islamists and the security state. In May 1993, Djaout became the first journalist to be murdered. Djaout opposed the Islamists, but he was also strongly critical of the Algerian regime.

When a member of the GIA claimed responsibility for the killing, his fellow intellectuals denounced what they said was a cover-up. A group of his friends formed the Truth Committee for Tahar Djaout, demanding an investigation into who had ordered the killing. One of the committee members, professor Mahfoud Boucebsi, was stabbed to death the next day. Others would follow.

The GIA was blamed for most of these killings, but arrests or serious investigations were rare. At best, the authorities were looking the other way, at worst, they were somehow complicit.

As Reporters Without Borders declared in a 1999 statement : « The mystery of the Djaout case crystalizes the malaise which prevails in Algerian society surrounding the assassinations officially attributed to the armed Islamist groups. ... The impunity enjoyed by the murderers leads to questions over why the regime is leaving the population to live in terror. »

By 1999, questions over the security forces' role in the violence reached a crescendo. France 2 aired a documentary with evidence linking the government to the massacre of Bentalha, as does Nesroulah Yous' *Who Killed at Bentalha*. A documentary by Canal Plus investigates similar suspicions surrounding the assassination of the popular Berber singer Lounes Matoub.

Souaidia became the first eyewitness to give evidence confirming what so many had suspected for so long. His book became a bestseller in France, and a source of considerable embarrassment to the generals. Algerian media attempts to discredit him included variously accusing him of terrorism, rape and of translating his book into Hebrew as part of an Israeli conspiracy to destabilize Algeria.

Even more explosive was the defection of Col. Mohamed Samraoui, who had been head of the DRS's notorious counter-espionage department. His tell-all book, *Chronicles of the Years of Blood*, came out in August 2001 and alleges that the GIA had been born in the depths of the DRS.

Ultimately, the international community would prove unwilling to explore what had really happened in Algeria. The French had too many political and economic interests in Algeria. And with the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, Algeria was welcomed as a key ally in the Bush administration's « War on Terror. »

Domestically, impunity and amnesia became the rule. Asking questions about who was really behind the violence, long derided by the regime as a foreign-led « Who Killed Who » lobby, became illegal under President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation law in 2006.

The mass graves that dot the Algerian countryside have never been exhumed, and the families of the forcibly disappeared continue to demand justice.

This is a history the Egyptian generals know all too well. But so, too, does the Muslim Brotherhood.

Yasmine Ryan

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