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GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO THE MASSACRES

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1. Introduction

To fulfil their obligations on human rights protection under the UN Convention, the Algerian authorities were to report to the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) in 1995. Instead, the report was only submitted in 1998, with a delay of nearly three years. The 55-page report only served to confirm the deliberate failure of the Algerian authorities to provide specific and pertinent information about the grave human rights crisis in the country. The report was viewed by many observers, and human rights organisations in particular, as yet another example of the authorities' complete disregard for their national and international obligations in terms of human rights protection. The Algerian regime stands accused of gross and systematic violations of human rights. A number of NGOs, politicians, official government representatives and independent personalities have clearly indicated that the authorities have a hand in the atrocities and wave of massacres which have plagued the country. The Algerian regime should answer its critics but refuses to do so and hides behind denials and dismissals.

The critics' suspicions are fuelled by the Algerian authorities' intransigent position with regards to an independent enquiry. Many observers and human rights campaigners maintain that the continued claims by the authorities that the blame rests with '*terrorist groups*' can easily be verified by an independent enquiry. But the authorities slam the doors shut in the face of any call for such an enquiry. Paradoxically, Algiers did accept external *political* interventions, like the visits by the EU troika and the European Parliament, in 1998, followed by the UN panel's visit, led by ex-Portuguese President Mario Soares. Such visits, which had no human rights components and no investigative powers, were not regarded as '*interference in internal affairs*'. Clearly, this stands in stark contrast with the authorities' persistent and forceful refusal to allow access to international human rights experts on the grounds of interference in the country's internal affairs.

The aim of this paper is two-fold: to give an account of the authorities' responses to their critics and to highlight the responsibility of the government in the killing of innocent civilians. It is argued here that the authorities' reactions are characterised by a classic discourse of official denial, whereby euphemistic and legalistic jargon and labels are used to mask, sanitise and deflect the ultimate responsibility onto the victim.¹

It is worth noting that by authorities it is meant the President (or more generally the Presidency), and the government with all its satellite organisations. The reaction of the armed forces is dealt with separately in another chapter of the present book. The diplomatic corps (including embassies and ministry of foreign affairs) is also the subject of a separate contribution.

In addition to this introductory section, this paper comprises three sections. Section 2 deals with the rhetoric of official denial and looks at the government use of euphemistic jargon when framing its replies to allegations of involvement in the massacres, when denying responsibility and when displacing blame onto the 'other'. Section 3 discusses how some of the responses fall under the strategy of *condemning the condemners*; turning a defensive position into an attack on the critic. A summary of related statements and/or comments are grouped as a table at the end of the paper.

2. The Rhetoric of Official Denial

2.1. Downplaying the Scale of the Tragedy

On the night of 5 to 6 September 1997 more than 195 civilians were massacred and over 100 were injured in a single atrocity.² Following the massacre, the authorities prevented privately-owned newspapers from contacting survivors without first obtaining prior permission from the police. The latter would grant the permission only if the names of the interviewees were mentioned in the reports. This condition made the chances of discovering what happened in Beni Messous through the newspapers virtually impossible, since the survivors would be putting their lives in danger if they contradicted the official version of events. Meanwhile, on national television accounts of Princess Diana's funeral monopolised the screen. Not a word was said about the massacre. Nonetheless, in the era of satellite television literal denial is not the best option. It is simply inconceivable to maintain that '*nothing is happening*', and that '*there are no massacres*'. This option being ruled out, the next *more credible* option would be to downplay the scale of the tragedy.

Led by the Prime Minister, Ahmed Ouyahia, the government insisted that the security situation was 'under control' and that 'terrorism was residual. Mr Ouyahia also disputed the loss of life being more than 100 000 dead since the conflict began in 1992³. He stated that only 26 536 had died, a figure that, according to him, included members of the security services, and that 21 137 were injured⁴. No ingenious calculations were required to realise that if these figures were accurate, Algeria's war would be the first one in the modern age in which the number of wounded was less than that of the dead. He insisted that the country's problems were not as bad as portrayed by foreign reporters and that things were under control^A. Other related remarks made by the Prime Minister in this context are reported below.

Mr Ouyahia was vocal in his attempt to try to convince the domestic and international public that the situation was under control. In mid-December 1996 he stated that '*terrorism lives its last convulsive and insane movements*'.⁵ A few

^A During a press conference in late June 1999, in Crans Montana – Switzerland, new President Abdelaziz Bouteflika talked about 100 000 victims!

weeks later he reaffirmed the government's grip on the situation: '*here, as well as in other regions of the country the situation tends to normality and terrorism is defeated.*'⁶ Almost a year later, the same claim was emphasised again: '*the squalid beast of terrorism has been eradicated.*'⁷

Mr Ouyahia was not alone in insisting that Algeria's problems were minimal and under control. Sitting in his opulent offices, Mohammed Rezzag-Bara, President of the National Observatory for Human Rights (Observatoire National des Droits de l'Homme, ONDH), was equally vehement in his denial of the scale of the tragedy. Speaking before the Prime Minister's parliamentary address on Wednesday 21 January 1998, Mr Rezzag-Bara said:

There is no great catastrophe here. It is of a completely different scale to the one the West presents. Since 30 December, there have been only 900 or so victims in a dozen villages across Algeria, an area of over a million and a half square kilometres. I hardly believe that constitutes a humanitarian crisis.⁸

The ONDH claims to be politically independent but it is in reality a governmental organisation that follows whatever policy is advocated by the regime. It was set up by the regime to oppose and check the truly independent Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH). The ONDH is, therefore, allowed to operate inside Algeria, because it adheres to the rules of the game. When these rules are violated, the authorities are quick to react. The French newspaper *Le Monde*, of 20 February 1997, reported that the Interior Minister had issued a solemn warning to the national press. He accused certain newspapers of playing the game of the terrorist propaganda by inflating the figures of victims. His reaction followed the publication of information about three other massacres which were not made public by the authorities.

The authorities do not always succeed in their endeavour to play down the magnitude of the massacres. In their propaganda aimed at '*exposing the monstrous atrocity and inhumanity of the terrorists*'⁹, or when they are explaining why the army cannot protect its own citizens they contradict the strategy of downplaying the scale of the tragedy. Private statements reported by a foreign journalist can be contrasted with the claims of '*a situation under control*' and '*residual terrorism*'.

The Algerian Cabinet Minister ushered me into his office and issued a chilling warning. 'You must understand that the terrorists could be anywhere. They could be waiters in your hotel ... They could put poison in your drink.'¹⁰

The Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia declared that Algeria '*faced the most horrible form of criminality and terrorism known to humanity.*'¹¹ In late December 1997, General Kamel Abderrahmane, commander of the Western military region, urged the residents of the Relizane area to form pro-government mi-

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litas. 'People must either arm or take refuge in towns', he said. 'The state does not have the means to put a soldier in front of every house.'¹²

The above remarks and the continuing violence in the country belie the authorities' over-emphasised claims that the situation is 'under control' and that 'terrorism is residual'. The security is certainly under control in the areas that matter to the military regime, i.e. where there are oil and gas installations that ensure the flow of money to its coffers. In these areas foreign oil companies enjoy full protection. But in other parts of the country, the civilian population is denied the protection of the state and lives in fear of massacres.

There are no limits to the startling techniques that are used worldwide to deny, cover-up, interpret or lie about the most obvious realities. With repressive regimes, numerous cases of official denial have been recorded over the years. One of the most recent, and vivid examples is that of the Serb government response to the February 1993 market massacre in Sarajevo: either there was no massacre or the Bosnians had themselves faked the massacre by bringing in corpses from previous atrocities, or the Bosnians had deliberately bombed their own people to attract international support. However, whilst in the past such denial techniques and methods enabled dictatorial regimes to get away with their crimes, the proliferation of human rights monitoring groups coupled with advances in information technology are pushing official denials to the wall.

2.2. Interpretive Denial and the Use of Euphemistic Labels

On many occasions, Algerian officials have used the language of legalism as palliative terms to present the crisis as a mere battle between a legitimate State and a bunch of criminals and desperate terrorists. For example, the Interior Minister, Mustapha Benmansour, told Human Rights Watch '*I do not consider that Algeria violates human rights. All the procedures are being implemented in accordance with the law. There is no violation except for a few cases of abuse, such as insults or beatings, during operations – but these abuses are dealt with by legal proceedings and internal disciplinary measures... In 1992 and 1993 we lived a war and, at the time, the very foundations of the nation were threatened. Yet Algeria has always circumspectly respected human rights.*'¹³

In a report titled 'Algeria shirks its responsibilities before the Human Rights Committee'¹⁴ four major Human Rights organisations, wrote: '*Every question raised by the Committee members concerning individual cases was skirted by the (Algerian) delegation, which hid behind general and theoretical remarks. Like the report presented to the Committee, the member of the Algerian delegation focussed on references to laws and procedures, completely avoiding the crucial problem of multiple violations of the covenant's provisions as well as of Algerian legislation itself.*'¹⁵

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Admitting the ‘facts’ but denying the interpretive framework that is placed on them is another common alternative to literal denial. Yes, there has been a massacre, people have been brutally killed and mutilated but what has happened is not part of a ‘dirty war’ in which the State is suspect, instead what happened is something else, something that not only raises the State above any blame but also reallocates the massacre to a less pejorative class of events. The most familiar form of interpretive denial is the use of euphemistic labels and jargon. For instance, interior minister Benmansour was reported by CNN to have said: *‘Algeria has been able to stand up with solid determination and faith against the forces of destructive terrorism which are living their last hours in our blessed land.’*¹⁶ Yes, there is a crisis but, as Benmansour said, Algeria (i.e. the State) is able to stand up with *determination* and *faith* against the forces of *destruction* and *terrorism*.

2.3. Denial of Responsibility

This type of denial aims at deflecting the ultimate responsibility onto the victim. The government accepts that atrocities did occur but attributes the responsibility to forces that supposedly have nothing to do with the state and are beyond its control. The blame falls on ‘Islamist terrorists’, this unknown ghostly entity. In this way, the atrocities cannot be considered as a human rights crisis because the state is not directly involved and is, therefore, not accountable. Furthermore, attributing the responsibility to these groups is a way of making the population feel guilty about the disastrous consequences of its wrong choice in December 1991. Euphemistic labels are again used here to describe these ‘terrorists’ who are seldom (if at all) caught alive.

To reinforce this denial of responsibility the government rejects outright an independent enquiry. There is no need for an enquiry, for the killers are known: ‘Islamist terrorists’. For instance, Hadri Kamel, Communications Consul at the Algerian Embassy in Washington, declared: *‘we are against an inquiry because everyone knows who is killing. The people of Algeria know that it is the terrorists who have been doing the killing.’*¹⁷

Newspapers reported that the Algerian officials were consistent in directing the blame towards the ‘other’. The latter being the ‘fundamentalist’, ‘the terrorist’ or, more precisely, the dissolved party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). The Guardian quoted an Algerian official telling the survivors of the Bentalha massacre: *‘you wanted the Islamic fundamentalists, now you’ve got them!’*, in reference to the 1991 general election the FIS was poised to win before the poll was cancelled.¹⁸ Along the same lines, the Herald Tribune wrote: *‘government officials say that the killings were carried out by Islamic militants seeking to overthrow the military-backed government.’*¹⁹ The Irish Times quoted Mr Attaf (then Foreign Minister) as saying: *‘this dissolved party bears primary responsibility for the tragedy we are living through. It has no role to play in our country.’*²⁰

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2.4. Denial of the Victim

It is not realistic to believe that the population which voted overwhelmingly for the Islamic alternative, and clearly voiced its rejection of the corrupt military regime, will easily change its opinion simply because the authorities want them to. The flagrant loss of legitimacy suffered by the military regime required drastic measures to force the population to give up its right to choose its own destiny. A terrible policy, aimed at making the recalcitrant population realise its fatal mistake when it voted for the wrong party, had to be implemented. In brief, this policy had the following contours: *It's alright if you did not know. We now make you see the barbaric faces of those you voted for.*

Whilst working towards achieving this aim, the authorities' denial of the victim plays a crucial role. By dehumanising the Islamists, the latter would become a lower form of being with no right to life, no feeling and no entitlement to compassion. They would be transformed into savages, vermin, animals, and monsters. With time, the people who voted for the Islamists would cease to feel their presence. Because their existence as normal human beings would not be acknowledged they would not, therefore, be seen as victims.

Denial of the victim is also used by the government to 'recruit' as many cooperative perpetrators as possible from within the civilian population, and convert the rest into accomplice bystanders. Instead of allowing independent experts to investigate the identity of the perpetrators, the government is more comfortable laying the blame on Islamist terrorists who are referred to as savage beasts, criminals and a killing machine that has no political agenda. The dehumanised opponent cannot be seen as a victim, instead he is a barbaric monster that deserves to be eradicated. The following news reports show how the government meticulously chooses its words when describing the alleged perpetrators. The words are also judiciously chosen to achieve the effect of dehumanising the opponent.

The Algerian authorities say the violence is the work of extremist Islamic groups, which it refers to as terrorists and criminals.²¹

In a press conference held on 29 April 1997 at Jenane El-Mithaq (Algiers) the Prime Minister said: *'The horrible massacres perpetrated through acts of barbaric and savage terrorism have no precedent on any continent over centuries.'*²²

The terrorist groups are no more than a killing machine without political, religious or popular ideals said Ahmed Attaf, Foreign Affairs Minister, on 18 February.²³

Following the Rais massacre, the Prime Minister, Ahmed Ouyahia, reaffirmed that *'the squalid beast of terrorism has been eradicated'*.²⁴

The President, Liamine Zeroual, has also reaffirmed the state's determination to fight *'the groups of criminals, traitors and mercenaries'*.²⁵

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3. Condemning the Condemners

The Algerian authorities' denial was not made easy by the different reports, communiqués and declarations of NGOs and human rights organisations. To these critics the authorities have often reacted angrily by counterattacking the critics' own records. The strategy followed is that of '*shoot the messenger*'.

The critics are accused of hypocrisy, dishonesty and even mediatic terrorism. The main critics usually include human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and Algerian personalities living abroad such as ex-prime minister Dr Abdelhamid Al-Ibrahimi, and army or security forces defectors such as Colonel Ali or Captain Haroun. Sometimes the process of discrediting the critics appeals to raw emotions and feelings of victimisation. For instance, they do not like to see Algeria stable and prosperous, or they have an anti-Arab prejudice. In a speech broadcast on national television, President Liamine Zeroual denounced the existence of a conspiracy led by '*foreign powers*' with the help of Algerian personalities. Mr Zeroual accused these foreign powers of '*using the terrorist movement to undermine the will of the sovereign Algerian people and to keep Algeria in a spiral of destruction and humiliation.*'²⁶ The same '*foreign powers*' were attacked by the Interior Minister, Mr Mustapha Benmansour, who argued '*terrorism would not have developed without the leniency, or rather indulgence, of certain countries which do not wish to see our Arab world stabilise and our people develop and progress.*'²⁷ Sometimes the attack is direct as in the following Prime Minister's declaration: '*If we talk about those who contributed directly to arming the Algerians and training Algerians with regard to terrorism and striking this Muslim nation, I mention at the top of this list the Tehran regime.*'²⁸

In the strategy of 'shooting the messenger' a mere call for an independent enquiry can become a form of terrorism. In this context the newspaper *Le Parisien* wrote: '*the Algerian delegation denounced yesterday before the UN in Geneva the mediatic terrorism of Amnesty International and three other non-governmental organisations that have issued a call for an international enquiry on massacres in Algeria.*'²⁹

In effect, the strategy of 'shooting the messenger' seeks to cover the ground for which the rhetoric of denial is inappropriate. However, no matter how clever and intellectually convincing a crafty denial may be, it cannot be flawless. Therefore it is usually accompanied by attacks on the sources of information, casting doubt on the truth of the allegations and questioning the credibility of the critic. However, Amnesty International is well aware of this strategy and has consistently tried to dissuade the Algerian authorities from embarking on such a futile course. In one of its reports, it advised them on the right course of action to take: '*the energy put into trying to discredit Amnesty International and its work on Algeria should be put into investigating torture, ill-treatment, arbitrary detention, disappearances and extrajudicial executions.*'³⁰

4. What They Said: A Summary of Official Reactions

Respondent	Reaction	Date	Source
President	The State is determined to fight the groups of criminals, traitors and mercenaries	25/01/97	Tribune de Genève
	Foreign powers, with the help of Algerian personalities, use the terrorist movement to undermine the will of the sovereign Algerian people.	20/02/97	Le Monde
Prime Minister	Terrorism lives its last convulsive and insane movements	30/12/96	Dernières Nouvelles D'Alsace
	Here, as well as in other regions of the country, the situation tends to normalise and terrorism is defeated.	01/01/97	Dernières Nouvelles D'Alsace
	The government has crushed the Islamist guerillas	08/01/97	Irish Times
	Algeria faced the most horrible form of criminality and terrorism known to humanity	8/09/97	Newsweek
	The squalid beast of terrorism has been eradicated.	10/09/97	Tribune de Genève
	Terrorism is defeated and the attacks against civilians are desperate acts.	07/11/97	Dernières Nouvelles D'Alsace
	The horrible massacres perpetrated by acts of barbaric and savage terrorism have no precedents in any continent over centuries.	18/01/98	Liberté
	Tehran is at the top of those who contributed directly to arming the Algerians.	23/01/98	The Times
Interior Minister	Certain newspapers are playing the game of the terrorist propaganda by inflating the figures of the victims.	20/02/97	Le Monde
	Algeria has been able to stand up with solid faith and determination against the forces of destructive terrorism which are living their last hours in our blessed land.	05/01/98	CNN
	Terrorism would not have developed without the leniency, or rather indulgence, of certain countries.	05/01/98	CNN
ONDH	There is no great catastrophe. Since 30 December, there have been only 900 or so victims. This hardly constitutes a crisis.	23/01/98	The Times
Foreign Affairs Minister	The terrorist groups are no more than a killing machine without political, religious or popular ideals.	20/08/97	Le Monde
	This dissolved party bears primary responsibility for the tragedy we are living through. It has no role in our country.	23/10/97	The Irish Times

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5. Concluding Remarks

A representative sample of government officials' reactions to the massacres has been reviewed. Their comments and statements put the blame on Islamic groups. However, the reactions are unanimous in rejecting calls for an independent enquiry into the massacres. If the government of Algeria has nothing to hide and is in no way involved in the massacres, a commission of enquiry can only comfort its position and remove any suspicion harboured by its critics. Its reactions follow a known patterns of denial, deceit, concealment, evasion and accusations against its critics.

The reactions of the Algerian government are typical of what Chomsky calls *'the sacred right to lie in the service of the state.'*³¹ The Algerian authorities are hiding behind the rhetoric of official denial not only to reinforce their claim of legitimacy but also to deny the opposition the very right to exist. When human rights reporters or other condemners try to shed light on the scale of the tragedy, the authorities are quick to resort to the strategy of *'shoot the messenger'*. Their message is clear: no one has the right to enquire or interfere but they have the right to subdue a recalcitrant population and force it into submission through atrocities and repression.

The Algerian government's classic discourse of denial is a typical response of a regime that has lost its legitimacy and is committing human rights violations to retain control of power. The dilemma of the population and of those who embraced the FIS ideals, in particular, is similar to that of a victim of torture who hears his interrogator shouting *'scream as you like, no one hears you and no one will believe you.'* When the tortured victim is released, he is faced with a double problem. First, he is not believed, and second, he is confronted with the doubt that *'he must have done something wrong!'*

Accepting the argument of the Algerian authorities that the massacres of tens of thousands of civilians is an internal affair is to legitimise the killing of innocent men, women and children. The matter would have been an internal affair if the state had not been a party to the conflict and had been able to provide adequate protection to all its citizens. When many fingers are pointed at the authorities accusing them of involvement in the massacres and when the authorities cannot convincingly refute these accusations, an independent enquiry into the massacres becomes a necessity. It is a requirement not only for today but also for tomorrow, so that Algerians can come to terms with their tragedy, nurse their deep wounds and start the process of national reconciliation. Until the truth emerges, Algeria will continue to drown in a blood bath that may continue for many years to come.

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Government Responses

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NOTES

¹ The categorisation of responses in this article is informed by the work of Stanley Cohen, 'Government Responses to Human Rights Reports: Claims, Denials and Counterclaims' - Human Rights Quarterly, No 18, pp. 517-543, 1996.

² *The Irish Times*, 8 September 1997.

³ In December 1996 Maitre Abdenmour Ali Yahya spoke of more than 190,000 victims (*Tribune de Genève*, 11 December 1996). The French *Le Figaro* reported, on 16 April 1996, that western intelligence services estimated a figure of more than 300 000 dead.

⁴ CNN, 22 January 1998.

⁵ *Dernières Nouvelles D'Alsace*, 30 December 1996

⁶ *Dernières Nouvelles D'Alsace*, 1 January 1997

⁷ *Tribune de Genève*, 10 September 1997.

⁸ *The Times*, 23 January 1998.

⁹ See Amnesty International, Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, Human Rights Watch, Reporters sans Frontières, *Algérie, Le Livre Noir*, La Découverte, Paris 1997, p. 55.

¹⁰ *The Independent*, 24 January 1997.

¹¹ *Newsweek*, 8 September 1997.

¹² *The Irish Times*, 5 January 1998.

¹³ Amnesty International, Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, Human Rights Watch, Reporters sans Frontières, *Algérie, Le Livre Noir*, La Découverte, Paris 1997, p. 143.

¹⁴ AI INDEX: MDE 28/29/98, Geneva, 21 July 1998.

¹⁵ Amnesty International, Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, Human Rights Watch, Reporters sans Frontières, *Algérie, Le Livre Noir*, La Découverte, Paris 1997, p. 127.

¹⁶ CNN, 5 January 1998.

¹⁷ *The Irish Times*, 5 January 1998.

¹⁸ *The Guardian*, 24 September 1997.

¹⁹ *The Herald Tribune*, 20 October 1997.

²⁰ *The Irish Times*, 23 October 1997.

²¹ BBC, 13 January 1998.

²² *Liberté*, 18 January 1998.

²³ *Le Monde*, 20 August 1997.

²⁴ *Tribune de Genève*, 10 September 1997.

²⁵ *Tribune de Genève*, 25 January 1997.

²⁶ *Le Monde*, 20 February 1997.

²⁷ CNN, 5 January 1998.

²⁸ *The Times*, 23 January 1998.

²⁹ *Le Parisien*, 16 October 1997.

³⁰ AI Report entitled: "Algeria: Investigating Violations is a Better Way to Protect Human Rights than Denying that Violations Occur".

³¹ Noam Chomsky, *The Culture of Terrorism*, Pluto, London 1988.

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National Responses

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