

ALGERIA'S DIPLOMACY AND THE MASSACRES: THE SELLING OF ATROCITIES

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1. Introduction

On Monday, 21 September 1998, as the Kosovo conflict began at long last to take the form and feel of an international crisis, the Serbian government under the control of Slobodan Milosevic asked its parliament to issue an official condemnation of international 'pressures, threats and blackmail' against Serbia over the separatist conflict in Kosovo. The United States and European governments were particularly pointed out for 'abusing the mechanisms of the UN for the realisation of their own aims, which directly threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Yugoslavia'.[1] The draft statement went on to strongly condemn 'all those countries which are rendering financial, media, military and other aid to the terrorists while advocating military intervention for hypocritical humanitarian reasons', echoing the words of Serbia's president who had also earlier denounced unspecified countries for 'helping the terrorists with money and arms, and giving them media support'.[2] Ten days later, in reaction to fresh reports of new atrocities against civilians perpetrated by security forces in Kosovo, United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan expressed his great shock over the latest developments. The Secretary-general was especially outraged – no doubt taking the affront personally – since the reports came only a few days after the foreign minister of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Zivadin Jovanovic, had flatly denied in a face-to-face meeting with the Secretary that any such actions were taking place.[3] The Secretary–general pointed out that although the Yugoslav authorities had the right to maintain public order and to defend the country from provocative actions, such 'actions can never justify the pattern of terror, including the burning of houses, looting, killing of livestock and wanton killing that have been reported these past few days'.[4]

Anyone who has been following the horrific news on the Algerian crisis with any degree of attention will not fail to draw the necessary parallels between the pronouncements and protestations emanating from Serbia's spokesmen to the world and those articulated by their no-less articulate Algerian counterparts. Not that the crisis in Kosovo and the one that has been ravaging Algeria can be placed on equal footing. After all, the Kosovo crisis is at this time of writing no more than seven months old, claiming in life around 600 people (although the count threatens to rise quickly), while Algeria's conflict is about to enter its seventh year, and has claimed more than 60,000 lives (many put the figure above 120,000). One should also not fail to acknowledge that the international outcry over the crisis in Kosovo is more than one order of magnitude as vociferous as its outcry over the Algerian tragedy has been – yet another indication that the parallels between the two situations can only be pushed so far. But nonetheless, parallels there are, and

they should be duly noted: according to the various official spokesmen (whether Serbian or Algerian), the world at large is conspiring against a legitimate government; it is aiding and abetting terrorism and rebellion; it is scheming to undermine the stability of the country; and not least, it is sparing no effort to erode and altogether do away with the very sovereignty of the country.

Of course, the arguments and protests – the phrases and formulations themselves, in fact – are as old as human government. Looking no farther than ten years back, the very same protestations have been formulated in nearly the same language by Boris Yeltsin in his brutal assault on Chechneya, by Slobodan Milosevic in his ethnic-cleansing campaign in Bosnia, by South Africa's regime in reaction to world condemnation of apartheid, by Israel in its continued occupation of South Lebanon, Syria's Golan Heights, the West Bank and Gaza, by Saddam Hussein in his genocidal war against the Kurds and his invasion of Kuwait, and by a succession of American administrations in their chronic war-mongering outbursts against anyone who challenges their claim to complete hegemony. In all cases, and to approximately the same degree of outrageous hypocrisy, transparent mendacity, and utter contempt for international law, the argument advanced has been the same: the world without is for some mysterious reason conspiring against an innocent government engaged in the perfectly legitimate act of protecting its interests and those of its people. But for all their similarities, each case has its own particular story to tell. Each has its tales of horror and its tallies of death. None of the tragedies briefly mentioned can be explained easily in simple, straightforward narratives – in fact, at the very core of the conflict is the simplistic bifurcation of the world into two camps: those who are on our side and those who wish us ill. The task of explanation proper belongs to the historian of tomorrow who will have to go beyond a story of good v. evil and identify for us who were responsible for committing crimes, why and how they perpetrated those crimes, who were the victims of those crimes, and for what reason were those crimes perpetrated against them.

The staggering savagery that has been visited upon innocent civilians in Algeria leaves the observer in a state of shock and bewilderment and defies him to construct a plausible narrative that will make sense of the unrelenting horror. But if we have to wait for tomorrow's historians to obtain answers, it is perfectly within our right to at least ask the obvious questions: 'Who is behind the massacres?'; 'Why are men, women, and children being killed, and in such a brutal way?'; 'Who benefits from such killings?'; 'How does one explain the continuing massacre of civilians?'; 'Why can't the government protect civilian populations that are being massacred?'; 'What about accounts that have reported massacres perpetrated near military barracks?'; 'Why are the Algerian authorities so opposed to an international inquiry into

what is taking place in Algeria?', and countless other questions that beg to be answered.

Such questions are not impossible to answer – eventually – but they are difficult to address now in any conclusive way, since the very forces and interests behind what is taking place in Algeria today are still very much in effect and hard at work obfuscating the truth. But often enough, the act of obfuscation itself will go a long way helping us discern at least an outline of the truth. What follows is an attempt to examine some of the official answers and explanations willingly provided by Algeria's spokesmen to the world – its diplomatic corps – in reaction to the international outcry and indignation over the horrible massacres in Algeria over the last two years. The Algerian diplomatic corps has been actively engaged, from the outset of the crisis in January 1992, in a relentless campaign of damage control and image building, and has played a crucial role in the regime's overall strategy for dealing with the crisis. What the analysis will show is that the official line adopted and articulated by the Algerian authorities in presenting to international opinion their version of what is taking place in Algeria raises more suspicion than it answers questions and concerns.

2. Defensive Strategies

2.1. False Dilemmas

A time-honored rhetorical strategy employed by regimes on the defensive is to divide the world into two opposite camps: those who are loyal friends of the regime and those who are its sworn enemies. No middle ground is allowed for those who are not interested in either end of the two extremes. Algeria is a sovereign state, and therefore its internal affairs are not the business of anyone other than the Algerian state. Those who insist on holding the state answerable for such internal matters as the security and welfare of its civilian population are either maliciously acting with the intent of undermining the authority and sovereignty of the state, or, worse yet, willingly providing aid and cover to the enemies of the state.

Astonishing in its simplicity as it may seem – there are only two sides: you are either with me or against me – this rhetorical strategy has in fact been the backbone of Algeria's official response to the many outcries of horror and indignation (though late in coming and weak in intensity) that have emanated from all quarters of the world. A telling example, articulated by Algeria's ambassador to the US, Ramtane Lamamra, coming in the thick of Algeria's blackest period of massacres (many more massacres were to follow yet), came in the form of his, 5 February, 1998, testimony to the US Congress's House of International Relations' Subcommittee on Africa hearing on Algeria. The ambassador explained with great aplomb that:

> The Algerian government, which is respectful of its own constitution and laws, as well as of international law, cannot cooperate in an undertaking whose sole visible and immediate effect would be the exoneration of terrorist groups from their crimes, and the delegitimization of the multi-party elected institutions of the republic.[5]

And more directly challenging the good will of those he was addressing:

> For any Algerian, whoever he is, sitting here, reading papers or following some of the questions – one can wonder if the accent here is not put on ways and means to obtain something from the Algerian government rather than ways to defeat terrorism.[6]

What that 'something' that the American congressmen wanted and that would be served by aiding and abetting terrorism, the ambassador did not care to elaborate.

Examples of the bifurcated world-view abound from Algeria's spokesmen to the world: Mourad Bencheikh, Algeria's ambassador to Sweden, explained that when independent inquiries into the Algerian massacres are requested by NGOs and other official bodies, 'these criminals are put on the same level as the security forces, which are acting in self-defence to protect the Algerian state and population.'[7] Echoing the same sentiments, Algeria's ambassador to France, Mohamed Ghoualmi, declared, that 'the international community should show solidarity with Algeria's fight against terrorism',[8] obviously meaning by 'solidarity' a total and uncritical acceptance of the Algerian state's version of events. He went on to state that 'it was unacceptable that while there was an eruption of terrorist acts, pressure was being exerted exclusively on the state, as if it were responsible'.[9] The pressure to which the ambassador is referring, it must be noted, is nothing more than mere declarations and exhortations by various world bodies and personalities for the state to come to the aid of innocent civilians in imminent mortal danger and for a plausible explanation about why hundreds of people could be slaughtered within a few hundred yards from army barracks.

The answers from other Algerian diplomats have invariably been deaf to the outcries of indignation. In response to Lebanese offers to mediate negotiations, Hassan Bou Fares, Algeria's ambassador to Lebanon, energetically denounced the offer, explaining that 'We reject any attempt by Lebanon to interfere in our internal affairs', accusing 'some [Lebanese] parties and committees, with nothing in common except their enmity towards Algeria, of holding meetings under the cover of solidarity with the Algerian people'.[10]

The reply from Mohamed Salah Dembri, Algeria's pugnacious ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, intoning the official line, is that 'Algeria is an independent, sovereign country [...] We do not accept any interference in our affairs'.[11] Again, 'interference' meaning any statement or declaration that does not embrace the Algerian regime as an absolutely innocent

victim to savage terrorism. The very vocabulary and language, in fact, are expected to comply with the Algerian regime's version of reality, at the pain of declaring those who do not respect that language the abettors of terror. 'Those who wish to give terrorism legitimacy and honor by describing it as "armed opposition",' Algeria's ambassador to the UN in New York, Abdallah Baali, declared, 'would bear a heavy responsibility for the tragedy faced by some countries plagued by terrorism.'[12] Sometimes, even mere official expressions of concern can draw angry indignation from Algeria's spokesmen. In her first meeting with Algeria's foreign minister, Ahmed Attaf, Mary Robinson, then the new UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated that:

> One of the things that has been an important experience of the international community is that human rights don't have those kinds of borders. [...] And when there are serious violations of civilians' rights and when the situation is as bad as in Algeria, I do not and cannot consider that to be an internal situation. [...] I know the government of Algeria may have a different view, but I am very concerned about the level of violence.[13]

To which, Mr. Attaf answered with great severity that the Commissioner had 'surpassed her authority in judging the position of a sovereign member state'.[14] Carol Bellamy, UNICEF Director, did not fare better in the hands of ambassador Baali for merely voicing public support to an Amnesty International report on Algeria. Her very motives, in fact, were directly impugned by the ambassador: 'Your hasty support to a report that needs to be carefully studied, examined, and answered, leads me to question your true motives,' ambassador Baali wrote in a letter addressed to the director and made public to the press.[15] Exactly what dark motives the UNICEF director could possibly harbor against Algeria, the ambassador did not bother to elaborate, as usual.[16]

2.2. Ad hominen

A stronger and more aggressive version of the bifurcated-world strategy is the equally highly effective ploy of attacking the integrity of critics – any and all critics. In its most subtle articulation, this strategy is formulated in the guise of a challenge to the credibility of the critic: if doubt can be cast on the critic's credibility – e.g., their technical competence, their objective neutrality – then whatever damaging statements the critic may make will carry less weight and therefore have less impact. In the case of the Algerian diplomatic answer to the world, this level of subtlety has proven too high. Rather, time and again, when not asserting that those who do not agree with the Algerian official rendering of the situation are aiding terrorists, the Algerian diplomats have spent great energies impugning, in any way possible – whether relevant to the issues at hand or not – the character and moral probity of those who speak against them.

Here, three variations of the strategy are deployed, sometimes all at once: the person's character is attacked; the critic's circumstances are noted; and the critic is pointed out for not practicing what he preaches. A typical example of this strategy can be illustrated in ambassador Lamamra's testimony to Congress. Ten days before the ambassador's testimony, the American weekly television program, *60 Minutes* aired a segment on the recent waves of massacres that had been sweeping Algeria for the previous months. In the segment, Abdelhamid Ibrahimi, an Algerian ex-prime minister now in self-exile in the United Kingdom, was interviewed. The ex-prime minister stated during the interview – as he had on many occasions before and since – that the army was not only derelict in its duties of protecting civilian populations in mortal danger, but was primarily responsible for the massacres. The ambassador, obviously having a sense of the respect enjoyed by *60 Minutes* in the US, did not dare to suggest – as the impulse must have urged him to – that *60 Minutes* was for some dark reasons conspiring against the Algerian state, a proposition that would have probably startled the Congressmen. Instead, he focused on Mr. Ibrahimi himself, a personality most probably none of the congressmen had heard of before. Pointing out that Mr. Ibrahimi was prime minister and a politburo member during the one-party era (by this, the ambassador no doubt wishing to proudly highlight the 'democratic' character of the government he was serving, about which more soon), the ambassador expressed the need to 'say something about the credibility of such a witness, which is questioned by most Algerians, as this individual was a politburo member of the ruling party in the 1980s, where he was representing the pro-fundamentalist leaning'. The ambassador went on to state that 'as minister of planning and as prime minister between 1979 and 1988 – which is the "lost decade" – this individual is considered by most Algerians as the father of all disasters that have taken the country since then'.[17]

Aside the obvious hyperbole – did the ambassador mean that all the ills of Algeria emanated from this one great devil? – one might also be tempted to ask the following: how does the ambassador know how 'most Algerians' felt about an old politician? The ambassador, of course, does not say. The ambassador also does not bother to tell us how the vilification of Ibrahimi can replace an honest refutation of the grave accusations that the Algerian army may have a hand in the massacre of innocents.

A more gripping example from the same ambassador was his intense and outright demonisation of Amnesty International. To a congressman's query about witness accounts of survivors of the Bentalha massacres, where it was reported by Human Rights Watch, through accounts relayed by Amnesty International, that army units had stood by idly while for more than four hours the massacre of more than 200 people took place within a few hundred yards of their barracks, the ambassador confined his answer to articulating a lengthy diatribe against the objectivity of Amnesty International.

Amnesty International's allegations were, according to ambassador Lamamra, 'fanciful' and 'extravagant'. In fact, the ambassador went so far as to make the curious statement that 'for many Algerians, Amnesty International look more like the second outlawed political party in Algeria; that is, a second FIS, rather than a neutral NGO' (and, as already indicated, by 'neutral' the ambassador means 'uncritical' of the authorities). Again, how the ambassador was able to determine what most Algerians felt about Amnesty International or why Amnesty International would want to behave as a second FIS, the ambassador was not forthcoming with an answer.

Ambassador Lamamra's attack on Amnesty International is not an isolated case by any means. No less blatant examples of the *ad hominen* strategy abound from all quarters of Algerian diplomacy. One particularly noteworthy instance was articulated by ambassador Mohamed Salah Dembri in a statement against both Amnesty International and the FIDH to the 54th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) in Geneva.[18] According to the ambassador, Amnesty International and the FIDH are at best professionally incompetent and at worst guilty of practicing 'media terrorism'.[19] In his statement to the UNCHR, the ambassador said: 'we reject [Amnesty International's] worn out rhetoric, its simplistic methodology based on anecdotes [...] and anonymous testimony [...] as we reject its botched up field work conducted furtively and hastily."[20]

We will turn shortly to a detailed illustration of the extent to which the Algerian authorities are permissive of more complex methodologies of investigation – ones that, for instance, can be carried out with deliberation and freedom of movement – although one may already wonder how the ambassador would reconcile his observations about Amnesty International's methodology with Algeria's officially stated policy of refusing any foreign inquiries into massacres and other human rights violations. But for now, let us follow the ambassador's logic in his attack on the two organisations.

Not wishing to altogether dismiss Amnesty International – a historically respected organization – the ambassador deployed the trick of drawing a wedge between the past and the present. The ambassador did not hesitate to speak words of glowing praise about the 'Amnesty of Sean Mac Bride, the one he lead, with the unanimous consent of all states, towards the Nobel Peace prize'. But, 'Alas,' the ambassador exclaimed, 'the successors of Sean Mac Bride are behaving today like charlatans, far from contributing to the establishment of defenders of human rights.' That is, Amnesty International may once have been a defender of human rights – and we acknowledge that it once *was* – but that was *then*. Our critics of today have nothing in common with the Amnesty of the past.

The flip side of the 'historical-wedge' tactic is the opposite one of 'historical-continuity'. Whereas the argument with the 'historical-wedge' strategy

consists in stating that an essential difference obtains between what prevails today and what prevailed once (whichever of the two one wants to paint in favorable light), the 'historical-continuity' strategy consists in claiming the opposite: that what prevailed once still prevails today. One would think that in an argument sequence, one would not employ both strategies aside one another. But curiously, an example of the 'historical-continuity' strategy is provided by ambassador Dembri on the very next paragraph following his attack on Amnesty International, where he used the 'historical wedge' strategy. The target this time being the FIDH: 'If there is any NGO that does not deserve to sit in this sacred forum, it is it,' the ambassador proclaimed. He went on to say that:

> Since it was created in 1922, we would like to know what positions it took between 1922 and 1962, years of struggle and independence in Africa. [...] During this period, it 'valiantly' supported the rights of colonizers – all the rights of the colonizer against the colonized. And now that we are independent, it pretends to give us lessons about the law. [...] What did it say when the leaders of nationalist movements were being deported? [...] What did it say about the African holocausts? [...] Well, it said nothing! [...] This organization needs to explain its past between 1922 and 1962.[21]

No mention this time that the leader of the FIDH today – or the FIDH itself of today – is not the same leader of the FIDH of thirty years (let alone of seventy years) ago.

The nationalistic, anti-colonialist trope, old and worn out as it may sound, especially coming from a regime that has exhausted its historical legitimacy of revolutionary liberator, remains an enduring old favorite fall back position that has proven too well-entrenched in the psyche of Algerian diplomacy to give up that easily. What does the Algerian government say in response to France's half-hearted suggestion that 'Algerians have the right to protection'?[22] The answer from ambassador Dembri consisted in reminding the world of the 'violence of the French state during the colonial period', pointing specifically to the freshly resurrected scandal of Maurice Papon and the drowning of hundreds of Algerians in the Seine in October 1961.[23]

What is noteworthy to highlight in all of this, the diplomatic diatribes notwithstanding, is that in the end, the ambassadors never did bother to explicitly deny the substance of specific accusations – scandalous accusations that must be answered at once – by the FIDH, Amnesty International, and other observers, that security forces had willingly and willfully refused to help innocent civilians in mortal danger.

2.3. Lack of Proof

As we briefly noted earlier, ambassador Dembri criticized Amnesty International for its 'simplistic methodology based on anecdotes [...] and anony-

mous testimony' and rejected 'its botched up field work conducted furtively and hastily'.[24] Hearing the ambassador, one might be lead to believe that Amnesty International, or any other interested organization, is free to investigate as closely as it wishes what is taking place in Algeria. One might also be led to believe the same thing listening to the ambassador's reaction to declarations by the French Premier minister, Lionel Jospin, who had timidly suggested that there is such a thing as 'state violence' by the Algerian regime. 'When one makes an accusation,' the ambassador protested, 'one needs to back it up with solid proofs'.[25]

Let us look into how easy it is in Algeria to gather 'solid proofs'.

According to Anthony Loyd of *The Times*, 'In no other zone of conflict have I seen people so afraid to speak their minds to a foreigner. This fear is not eased by the constant presence of armed plainclothes "minders" who shadow almost every move of foreign journalists.'[26] Robert Moore of *The Observer* wrote on his part that 'It is not easy reporting when surrounded by 20 armed guards'.[27] In an effort to ensure that only their version of reality should come out, at the site of Beni Messous, where in the night of 6 September 1997, more than 200 people met with a violent death at the hands of assailants wielding knives and axes, the authorities 'forbade [journalists] from contacting survivors without first obtaining permission from the police station, which was only granted if the names and addresses of those likely to be interviewed were declared'.[28] The journalist goes on to remark that 'As the sight of a uniform is enough to silence the kasbah, that condition was virtually impossible to fulfil'.[29]

Small wonder that ambassador Dembri ringed hollow when he protested that 'Algeria wishes to solemnly remind the European Union, as it has done on many previous occasions, that it behooves those who are alleging violations of human rights to kindly produce documented proof and deposit them to the competent UN bodies for examination'.[30]

3. Offensive Strategies

3.1. Discourse in International Law

Another favorite rhetorical strategy often deployed by Algeria's diplomats in answer to allegations that the Algerian authorities are guilty of violating human rights is to state that Algeria is signatory to a long list of international human rights treaties. In answer to the question: 'why is the Algerian government opposed to an international investigation,' ambassador Lamamra answered in his testimony to the US Congress by observing that:

> Algeria is signatory to all the multi-lateral treaties on the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and Algeria is a signatory to 23 conventions aimed at pro-

> tecting and promoting human rights, and Algeria voluntarily accepts the optional protocols attached to those treaties, which establish monitoring mechanisms.[31]

How does the signing of treaties relate to actual reality and how does mentioning the number of treaties signed make Algeria more transparent, we are again not helped with an answer. As far as Algeria's responsibility to the international community is concerned, in the words of foreign minister Ahmed Attaf, 'The only obligation that we have at the moment is the periodic presentation of reports on the political and civil rights in front of the special United Nations commission on human rights.'[32] Not that these treaties and obligations are fair to the Algerian state in the first place – even if they are flouted and scorned as a matter of fact and policy. No doubt wishing to contribute to a more equitable system of human rights laws, ambassador Dembri complained that 'International human rights refers only to the responsibility of the state when, more and more, there exist entities outside of the state'. The remedy to this unbearable state of affairs? 'If we consider the phenomenon of mafias and terrorism, we have non-state entities whose responsibilities are not mentioned in international law as it exists today – and for this reason, we must further develop the notion of international law.'[33]

Getting back to the real world, we will do better in our attempt to evaluate the extent to which the Algerian state is respectful of the rule of law and the various treaties it has signed by examining how it actually behaves. According to Amnesty International:

> More people are dying in Algeria than anywhere else in the Middle East. Time and time again, no one is brought before a court of law. There is just a statement, released to the press, that the killer or killers has been killed.[34]

Often, alleged terrorists are first brought before national television, where they make various self-incriminating statements – that yes, they participated in an assassination or that they carried out a murder – and then, they disappear, never to be heard from again. Two particular cases are worth mentioning: the assassination of Tahar Djaout in June 1993, the first journalist to fall victim to the violence, and that of Abdelhaq Benhamouda on January 28, 1997, a labor leader and ally of president Zeroual. In both instances, the alleged perpetrators were presented in front of national TV to 'confess' to their crimes. In the case of Tahar Djaout, a certain Abdallah Belabassi claimed in his televised 'confession' that he drove the assailants to the scene of the crime and that he was operating under Islamist leader Abdelhak Layada. It turned out later that Abdallah Belabassi could not have driven the assailants, since he was a few miles away during the assassination with his hand ball team.[35]

The handling of Abdelhak Benhamouda's assassination represents an even more egregious example of the state's routine violation of human rights

and its lack of respect for the rule of law. Like Abdallah Belabassi, the alleged assassin of Mr. Benhamouda, Rachid Medjahed, was presented to national television on February 23, 1997, to 'confess' to his crime. Arrested by the authorities on February 15, the accused was not seen alive after his 'confessions' of February 23 and apparently died while in detention. According to Human Rights Watch,

> Except for his televised 'confession', neither Mr. Medjahed's relatives nor his lawyer saw him alive after his arrest. After first learning of his death the family had to wait a month before being permitted to view his body. They were then provided no details concerning the cause and circumstances of death. Authorities to this day have not as far as we know acknowledged Mr. Medjahed's death publicly.[36]

> Referring to the Medjahed case, an Algerian human rights lawyer said: 'This gives you an idea of how far *le pouvoir* can go. No trial. He was never brought before a court of law. He's on television in their hands. Then he's dead.'[37]

A rectification needs to be made, however, since the authorities have at this time of writing at last publicly acknowledged the death of Rachid Medjahed. In their report to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, in Geneva in March 1998, the Algerian delegation acknowledged the *possibility* of only *one single case* of extra-juridical killing – that of Rachid Medjahed – which it claimed was injured in a shoot out while resisting arrest, although, the report added, the matter was still under investigation by the Algerian authorities. [38] How does this account fit with the fact that Rachid Medjahed seemed perfectly healthy during his, 23 February 23 1997, televised confession – that is, one week after his arrest in February 15 – the delegation did not seem eager to elaborate.

The Belabassi and Medjahed cases are only two instances among thousands of others, all eloquent testimony of the extent to which the Algerian state is respectful of the 23 international human rights treaties and proclamations of which it is willing signatory. According to Robert Fisk of *The Independent*, 'documentary testimony [shows] that thousands – some say as many as 12,000 – men and women have been "disappeared" by a government that claims to be fighting "international terrorism".'[39] Those few brave Algerians who dare seek to establish the fate of the disappeared themselves run the danger of joining the rank of those they are trying to defend. Hear the testimony of human rights lawyer Maitre Mohamed Tahri:

> They took me to an office at the Cavaignac police station – I knew people who had died there under torture. They said to me: 'You are one of those who gives information to Amnesty International and other organizations [...] you're the one who arranges demonstrations, who causes trouble in this country.' From there they took me to the commissariat in Colonel Amirouche Street where I stayed for six hours. There they told me: 'You have contacts with journalists. You have contacts with Amnesty International.'[40]

Even more eloquent are the simple words of those who have witnessed the disappearance of loved ones. As one witness put it, 'Our children were not taken by terrorists, they were taken by the police.'[41] Another, pointing out the obvious, said:'The terrorists just kill, but the people who took my brother knew him and they came into our house with dogs. Terrorists do not use dogs.'[42]

'That the regime kills innocent people is plain,'[43] concludes John Sweeney of *The Observer*, not a far-fetched conclusion to draw if one examines the well-documented facts on the ground. And one may not even need to seek evidence, since the security forces do admit to stepping out of bounds, as in the following exchange between Robert Fisk and an Algerian official, 'a decent, highly educated man, a loyal servant of the military-backed government':

> 'Look, Robert,' the official said, 'you must realise that there are people who have lost wives and children. They are angry. And if you find one man and you think he knows of plans for a massacre in a village, well, do you not think it may be necessary to be "against" him – if you can save all those lives?' For 'against' read 'torture'. But that, I said, is Israel's excuse [...] My Algerian friend had no reply to this.[44]

3.2. Claim of Transparency

The mere fact that Algeria is signatory to various international treaties should suffice as proof to the world that the Algerian state does respect the human rights of its citizens and that therefore the allegations that the state violates those rights are 'fanciful' and 'extravagant'. Or so we are urged to think by Algeria's diplomats. By the same token, Algeria has nothing to hide and has been completely transparent by the mere fact that it has allowed entry to journalists into Algeria.[45] '561 journalists [...] were admitted to Algeria in the year 1997 alone,' ambassador Lamamra boasts, 'one of them having produced the famous *60 Minutes* program mentioned earlier.' The foreign minister was even more emphatic: 'last year, 561 foreign journalists covered the events in Algeria under *totally normal conditions*.'[46] In fact, the essence of the problem, according to ambassador Dembri, is the exact opposite:

> It is obvious that the international communication system is controlled and biased [...] We have great difficulty accessing it and this greatly restricts our ability to convince others [...] It is much easier to call upon our detractors outside of Algeria because – and let's be honest – they present an image of the situation in Algeria that is more congenial to the various accounts that are being advanced by our adversaries. It is for this reason that we must seriously think about undertaking a modernization of our communication system [...] We have many talented professionals, and we must provide them with the means to [...] clarify the situation for world opinion.[47]

Unfortunately, reality does not concur with the ambassador's claims. The fact, documented extensively, is that the vast majority of those reporters

who were admitted to Algeria were severely constrained in the most basic ways in where they could go and what they could see and have frequently complained about the difficulty to carry out their tasks.[48] Those who have dared circumvent the authorities have spent a night or two in jail and then summarily ejected from the country.[49] But then again, the facts should not be expected to obstruct the rhetoric: 'The Algeria of 1998, sure of its destiny,' ambassador Dembri insists,

> has shown the world that it is not averse to the rules of openness and open dialog. The recent European Troika visit proves this; the visit by the delegation led by Mr Soulier proves this; that of various personalities from all over the world proves this; that of journalists, intellectuals, and organization officials also proves this.[50]

First, one may be tempted to wonder how the ambassador reconciles his claims of total transparency and cooperation with the outside world with those of his superior, minister Ahmed Attaf, who claimed that there was nothing to be transparent about in the first place, and therefore nothing to cooperate over: 'The situation in Algeria is clear. It is a struggle waged by a state, through legitimate means, against terrorism, and there exit no doubts that require further investigations'[51], or again 'There is no fact-finding mission, no investigation that would be acceptable to us, [since] the truth is known [...] The authorities in your countries know full well and in detail who is behind the terrorist acts in Algeria'[52]. Needless to say that the answer is not obvious. Moreover, the ambassador fails to mention that both the Troika and the European delegations were in fact denied access to the site of massacres, the requested visits characterized by minister Attaf as 'unseemly tourism', and that journalists also have not been allowed access into the site of massacres since the visits of the European delegations.[53] According to *Le Quotidien*:

> The movement of foreign journalists has become severely constrained. Daily, new reasons are given to refuse requests to travel within the country. The harassment is also daily. In addition to the work visa, an accreditation of the ministry of Communication is also required [...] Police escort – which is mandatory and without which journalists are not allowed to move -- officially for security reasons – have also come to weigh very heavily on the journalists. It is not rare that during an interview an agent would interrupt by asking 'When are we going to leave?' or 'What more do you have to say?' When we know the fear that the police inspires in people in Algeria, the mere sight of a talki-walkie or an intimidating attitude suffices to discourage people from speaking up.[54]

It should come as no surprise that the obstacles local journalists face in their daily work are much harder to overcome than those faced by their international colleagues. If the regime is limited to using the devices of visas, work permits, and 'body guards' to control foreign journalists, the array of methods of local obstruction at the disposal of the regime are virtually limitless. Two categories of obstruction can be identified: those that are overt

and on the surface in compliance with the letter of the law (laws written in the first place to obstruct the flow of information), and those that are covert and aimed at undermining, outside the rule of law, the free circulation of information.

In the first category, we can mention the 58 acts of censorship by the authorities against local newspapers since January 1992. Such acts range from confiscation of newspapers, suspension of the right to publish, and prohibition against the publication of certain articles, and other similar official acts. The official justification given by the authorities for each act of censorship has been a 'security concern'. By 'security concern' is meant, quite simply, the total prohibition to publish in any detail or form information concerning losses or casualties incurred by the security forces during their operations. The motivations behind this policy are obvious: the state needs to project to its citizenry and to the world that it is in control of the security situation, and what better way to accomplish this than by suppressing any information about its own casualties? But we do not need to guess what the motivations are: a memorandum, spelling out in so many words what the state expected from the national press, dated 7 June 1994, was circulated from the Interior Ministry to the heads of the main press bodies, outlining to them how the security situation should be covered:

> In a period where all the vital forces of the nation are aimed at eradicating terrorism and subversion, I know that I will be able to count on your positive contribution in the anti-terrorist and anti-subversive fight [...]. Regarding information relating to acts of terrorism and subversion, the media are ordered to release only official communiqués [...]. The release of any information related to security matters, not officially authorized, is prohibited.[55]

The memorandum went on to provide helpful stylistic 'recommendations'. The press is asked to enter into 'mutual understanding' with the state for the sake of 'reducing the psychological impact of terrorist actions' by 'adopting an appropriate terminology lest the language unconsciously used is favorable to the ideology and propaganda of the opposition'; by 'systematically treating all security matters in inside pages, except in special instances, in which case the item should be given small space'; by 'avoiding the publication of the photograph of leaders of violent action'; by 'highlighting the atrocities committed by Islamist regimes' and by 'exposing the treachery and swindling of those who, in the name of religion and the purification of society, engage in criminal activities'. The memorandum goes on to explain that the journalists are expected to provoke 'the rejection of terrorism' by 'exposing the inhuman character of the barbarous practices of terrorism' and by 'showing that in the end [there is only] prison or death' that awaits the terrorists, thanks to the 'efficiency of the security forces which, even if they are not able to prevent all crimes, are always able to find the guilty'.[56]

Not altogether happy with the level of compliance – not negligible, one must note – by the national press, the memorandum of 7 June 1994, was followed in 11 February 1996, by the establishment of the more concrete and more efficient 'reading committees', to be seated within the printing houses. The suspension, from then on, would be executed at the printing facilities, even before publication, a positive advance in the quest for the efficient control of information. Since the installation of these committees, the press has suffered 10 acts of suspension or confiscation.[57]

The more efficient and more effective means of controlling the flow of information are those that are undertaken as a matter of course, without memoranda, decrees, or reading committees. Three realities about the basic working conditions of the Algerian press need to be highlighted. First, all four printing houses that exist in Algeria are owned by the state. An attempt by UNESCO, the International Federation for Newspaper Editors, and the International Federation of Journalists in February 1996, to help in building a private printing house was, not surprisingly, energetically rebuffed by the authorities in the name of national sovereignty. A monopoly of the printing houses, needless to say, affords the state with a powerful means of controlling the flow of information. *La Nation* and *El-Hourriya*, for instance, were refused publication in December 1996, for not paying their bills to the Algiers national printing house (the Societe d'Impression d'Alger). The decision, arbitrary, since the two newspapers were not the only ones with arrears, was patently an act of censorship, according to the two newspapers a 'political prohibition [...], a liquidation that obviously enters in the framework of reshuffling the national political and media scenes'.[58] As late as the time of this writing, late October 1998 – a period of great internal political turmoil within the power structure – the various power holders continue to exert their economic muscle to muzzle the press, effectively resulting in the suspension of *La Tribune*, *Le Soir d'Algerie*, *Le Matin*, and *El-Watan*.[59]

The second covert means of control is another crucial state monopoly on the material means of production and distribution: the importation of paper. The control in this case is effected indirectly by making it prohibitively expensive for newspapers to maintain their normal level of circulation. Through their monopoly on importation of paper, the state is not eager to seek the best price on the market for its paper, but rather to pass on to the newspapers the cost incurred in its purchases, in effect, a counter-subsidy of sorts. In fact, on the wake of the 1994 global paper crisis, the state did exactly this: it was paying $1,000 per ton, when a price of $735 could easily have been paid instead.[60] The result was an increase in the price of newspapers from 4 dinars to 10 dinars, on average and a reduction by more than 25% of normal circulation, outcomes that could not have chagrined the state to any considerable degree.

The third means of covert control of information is the virtual monopoly by the state of advertisement in private newspapers. The state agency ANEP controls more than 85% of the Algerian advertisement market, that is, about 1 billion dinars ($20 million).[61] Obviously, the state has in its hands a powerful tool of control, one deployed as a matter of course and on a daily basis, making this ostensibly least coercive of methods of control probably the most effective and pervasive one. In the words of *La Tribune*, 'the advertisement market of the public sector, distributed to the benefit of newspapers, cannot conceal the desire by the authorities to come in the way of those titles that refuse to follow orders.'[62]

All of these means of control are very effective precisely because they are seamlessly deployed in the stream of every day life. But one must not forget the violent subtext that undergirds them and makes their deployment and persistence possible. Between May 26, 1993 and today, a total of 58 journalists have been assassinated in Algeria. Who has been behind these assassinations, no one knows, since *no independent inquiries have been carried out* and *not a single assassin of journalist has been caught alive* Not surprisingly, Omar Belhouchet, the director of *El-Watan*, one of the major Algerian newspapers – himself the target of assassination on several occasions – has gone so far as to state that 'there are journalists who disturb the power structure, and I would not be surprised in the least if tomorrow I were to learn that some of my colleagues were assassinated by men in power'.[63]

In its report to the Human Rights Committee in April 1998, the Algerian government pointed out that in reaction to the rash of journalist assassinations in 1993 and 1994, the government had grouped together in a protective compound around 700 journalists. The intent in mentioning this government action was obviously to demonstrate, in response to widespread allegations to the contrary, that the government is solicitous of the well being of journalists. But one must seriously wonder how journalists who rely on government security forces for their very lives can carry out their crucial task of watchdog, especially when those very security forces have been accused of gross human rights violations.

3.3. Claim of Democracy

In a speech delivered during 'The 2nd Algerian-American Business and Cultural Conference' on 1 July 1998, ambassador Lamamra quoted with great satisfaction the following passage from a scholarly journal:

> [Algeria] is now remarkably pluralist. This was shown in the presidential election and in the political activity that accompanied it. Pluralism is shown in the way the government is now conducting its own 'national dialogue' with a wide spectrum of political elements [...]. A multiplicity of parties and political entities exist, which is closer to the Western model than almost anything else in the area. It puts Algeria

> ahead of most countries in the Third World and light years ahead of almost everybody else in the Arab World.[64]

To begin, let us note that the passage quoted by the ambassador was published in December 1996 – that is, prior to either the parliamentary elections, which took place only seven months later, in June 1997, or the municipal elections, which took place the following October, almost a year later. How a democracy can exist, let alone be described as 'light years ahead' of anything, without a duly elected parliamentary or municipal representation, the author does not tell us (a measure perhaps of the author's pessimistic assessment of what is to be reasonably expected to mean by 'democracy' in an Arab country). But let us be charitable and pretend that the quoted report had been written one year later, that is, after the parliamentary and municipal elections. Can it be denied that democracy, or at least a 'democratisation process', is a reality in Algeria?

The facts on the ground may help us answer these important questions. Let us begin with the letter of the law, the Algerian constitution, which was adopted in November 1996. Did the new constitution lead Algeria towards a political system where power is pluralistically shared? Hardly. Instead,

> The new charter dramatically expands presidential authority. The president can now rule by decree in certain situations not allowed previously, as when parliament is in recess or between sessions. Presidential appointment powers have been also broadened to include magistrates, the Central Bank governor and provincial governors, among others.[65]

Even more significantly, the new constitution all but guarantees a parliament at the mercy of an all-powerful president: the president is given virtual veto power over the parliament. This is achieved, constitutionally, by establishing a second body within the parliament, the Council of the Nation, two-thirds of which membership are indirectly elected by local and provincial legislatures, *with the president appointing the remaining third.* Given the further stipulation that passage of legislation requires the approval of three-quarters of the Council, it becomes almost a mathematical certainty that the president can successfully veto any legislation not to his liking.[66] No wonder that some experts – who risk no danger of being quoted by Algerian diplomats – have concluded that:

> The amended constitution is a step backward for democracy in Algeria. Prospects for a political opening and a more plural society have diminished significantly. Instead, the regime is retreating to the more predictable and peaceful days of absolute government control. Its 'reforms' retain democratic trappings (legal opposition parties, a functioning legislature) but virtually insure against any significant challenge to the regime's hold on power. And the new constitution is silent on the army's role, maintaining instead the constitutional ambiguity that has allowed the military to rule Algeria since independence.[67]

The facts on the ground are even less charitable if we look at the spirit with which the law is observed. In sharp contrast to the presidential elections, which were generally viewed, both by voters and international observers alike, as a potential genuine watershed point in the Algerian crisis,[68] both the parliamentary and municipal elections were marred by flagrant irregularities and outright fraud.

Not surprisingly, one would be hard pressed to suspect any such blemishes listening to Algerian interior minister Mustafa Benmansour announcing the results of the 6 June elections, describing them as a 'great achievement and a huge victory offered to the nation and rising generations'.[69] The minister went on to describe the contests as part of a 'series of major achievements made for the embodiment and consecration of democracy and the state of law within the framework of the efforts for national recovery'.[70] As to allegations of fraud, the minister stated that the contests were 'not marred by any distortion' and that 'fraud is not part of the vocabulary of Algerian politics'.[71]

Both international observers -- the 103 observers from the UN – and the opposition had a different story to tell. Reporting for the *Middle East Time*, Paul Schemm wrote that

> After abruptly canceling their scheduled press conference, the UN observers issued a press release questioning the 'transparency' of the voting and ballot counting procedures, especially those taking place at special mobile polling stations and sites reserved for military and security personnel.[72]

He goes on to write:

> These sentiments were echoed by nearly every opposition party. Nahnah of the MPS [Movement for Peace in Society] claimed that poll watchers from his party had been excluded from ballot sites and harassed, even shot at in one case. The leaders of the other parties, including Al Nahda, the Front for Socialist Forces (19 seats), the Rally for Culture and Democracy (19 seats) and Worker's Party (4 seats), variously described the elections as 'fraudulent', 'rigged', 'macabre', and a 'farce'.[73]

The winner, not surprisingly, was the National Democratic Rally (RND), created by the president a mere three months prior to the elections, which took 155 seats in the 380-seat parliament. While not a majority, the RND expects support from the former ruling National Liberation Front (FLN), which garnered 64 seats. Together, the RND and the FLN enjoy a solid majority of 57 percent of the seats.[74]

The state of 'democracy' in Algeria deteriorated further with the municipal elections of 23 October 1997. At the wake of these elections, two unauthorized protest marches, on October 27th and 30th, the first since the 1992 cancellation, were held to contest the official results. According to those results, the RND swept the municipalities, carrying an outright majority of

55% by itself, with its ally, the FLN, following as a distant second with 22% of the seats. Together, the RND and the FLN, then, obtained more than 77% of the seats, with the remaining 23% divided among the remaining parties – though unevenly, since the MSP, the junior in the three-way coalition partnership with the FLN and the RND, obtained more than half of the remaining seats.[75] The opposition was outraged, chanting during the demonstration 'slogans calling for the resignation of the prime minister, describing the military authorities as "assassins" and as "liars and tricksters" '.[76] Even a member of the allied FLN, feeling perhaps cheated by the excessively wide gap that separated his party from the first-place RND, grumbled in complaint: 'we do not want democracy to go backwards [...]. In the last election there was cheating. This time there was both cheating and violence.'[77]

Asked if there were irregularities, the minister of information answered: 'For us in the government, we believe that things took place in as normal a manner as possible.'[78]

3.4. Claim of Innocence

If we are to believe Algeria's diplomats, then, the Algerian state is: (1) respectful of human rights – the irrefutable proof being the 23 treaties of which Algeria is signatory; (2) open and transparent – the obvious proof consisting in the fact that journalists and other personalities were allowed entry into the country, and the fact that a multitude of newspapers do exist in Algeria; and (3) democratic – the unshakable proof being the fact that Algeria has an elected president, an elected national parliament, elected local assemblies, and a popularly adopted constitution.

As briefly pointed out, facts on the ground can be easily gathered to convincingly draw another picture, one closer to the real state of the world: the Algerian state is not respectful of human rights; it is not transparent and does not respect the right of its citizen to freely express themselves, and does not in any meaningful way tolerate, let alone promote, a pluralistic and democratic political system. But in and of themselves, these contradictions and the sharp contrast between a self-serving rhetoric and the harsh realities on the ground are nothing out of the ordinary and should not be so shocking. What we must remember, however, is that the long-winded perorations about Algeria's respect for human rights, the speeches about Algeria's transparency, and its fledgling spirit of democracy, were articulated in answer to some very specific questions about very specific events: *Why did the army fail, time and again, to come to the aid of civilians in mortal danger?*

Needless to say that an official answer that does not do violence to common sense has yet to be formulated. But let us nonetheless listen to what the state has to say by way of explanation. Ambassador Lamamra explained that,

first, reports that the army had failed to intervene in massacres were 'old style propaganda' and 'attempts to turn the exception into the rule'. He went on to say that:

> In the few cases where such situations occurred, the military barracks in question were army logistical and technical facilities with no combatant force or anti-terrorist units. Furthermore, it is known that security forces usually undertake assigned missions that require advance preparation and planning. I was told by various foreign experts that night time immediate response improvised with insufficient intelligence, appropriate mobility and night vision equipment is generally considered as hopeless and suicidal.[79]

In other words, yes, the state did fail to protect its citizens, but its failure was the exception, not the rule, and when it did fail, it failed for good reasons, with the opinion of experts (unnamed) thrown in for good measure. Prime minister Ahmed Ouyahia (a career diplomat himself, before taking on his new job in 1995), however, was not so willing to concede even the obvious, preferring instead to claim what was patently the opposite of what took place in reality: 'if it was not for the intervention of the security forces,' he insisted, speaking on an international television broadcast, 'which lost many men while intervening, hundreds more would have died.'[80]

Algeria's ambassador to the UN in New York, Abdallah Baali, in an interview on a popular American national radio show, explained that

> Most of the killings which took place have taken place in areas which were absolutely – I mean, which the security forces cannot and could not reach, I mean, quickly enough – places where you have no phone, no electricity, no connection whatsoever with any urban city or any military barrack. It's not, unfortunately, 911* and you can – you get three or four cars of police immediately. It's a little bit more complicated than that.[81]

For a depiction of reality that does not altogether agree with the prime minister's or the ambassadors' discourse, we will have to go to those who actually witnessed the massacres and survived them. A survivor exclaimed:

> It is impossible, at least 1,000 dead in a month! How can perpetrators assassinate hundreds of people and disappear in nature? This is something difficult for me to imagine: How come that in a zone so militarized as the Greater Algiers area soldiers could not hear even the echoing of the shooting. *Insha' Allah*, he sighed hopefully, one day we will know the truth.[82]

Another also wondered:

> How can tens, even hundreds of people be massacred in horrific conditions? How can this massacre last for hours without the security forces, actually stationed nearby, intervening?[83]

* 911 is the emergency number in the US.

Another witness: 'the soldiers came but halted on the other side of that road; they said they wouldn't come closer because they believed this road was mined.'[84] 'This is a great mystery,' said a witness to the Bentalha massacre, 'The criminals spent more than four hours here and despite the shooting, bombing and our screams for help that echoed across the village, no help turned up.'[85] According to other accounts, fleeing victims reached security installation themselves, pleading for help: 'Some of [a victim's] family reached a police and army post half a mile away to raise the alarm, but the killings went on for several hours.'[86] According to another witness, 'For four and a half hours [the terrorists] moved through the village at will, killing everyone they could.'[87] David Hirst of *The Guardian* wrote that 'According to witnesses', during the Bentalha massacre, 'the army sent tanks to the very edge of the town while a helicopter circled overhead.'[88] Roula Khalaf of *The Financial Times* wrote that 'survivors have complained that security forces, often stationed nearby, have not intervened to stop the killings.'[89] Robert Moore of *The Observer*: 'in the village of Larbaa the attack took place 300 yards from a large barracks.'[90] *The Guardian*: 'On September 7 [1997] the daily paper *El-Watan* had quoted several anonymous women swearing that the emergency services did not answer calls while the slaughter at Beni Messous was going on.'[91] According to Reuters: 'Survivors at Sidi Rais were more critical – "The day before the massacre, the forces were everywhere in the village, on the eve of massacre they disappeared," one said.'[92] Reuters again: 'Even during the slaughter pleas for help and word of what was happening reached the army post less than two km away, the troops did not react.'[93]

Is the official version, as articulated by ambassador Lamamra, then, believable? Massive evidence, collected in spite of the attempts by the authorities to suppress them, indicates otherwise. Again, the best answer is provided by someone who had witnessed the horrors first hand: 'Why do they want to hide the truth from us, of whom is this government making sports by trying to conceal reality?'[94]

4. Mitigating Factors

4.1. 'Residual' Terrorism

A long-standing official assertion from the Algerian authorities has been that whatever terrorism Algeria is facing now is 'residual' – that is, sporadic and not widespread – and is in reality the last series of desperate acts of otherwise politically discredited and bankrupt groups destined for imminent demise.[95] Only a few days before the Baraki massacre of 22 September 1997, where more than 200 people were slaughtered, prime minister Ahmed Ouyahia declared on national television that 'the increased vigilance of the

population, the determination of the security forces and the end of political bargaining [with outlawed Islamic political groups]' had left Algeria facing only 'residual terrorism'.[96] The aim in making such an assertion – severely out of step with reality as it may be – is at least twofold. First, it perpetuates the fundamental policy strictly followed by the regime of casting the crisis as a security problem rather than addressing the original basic causes of the Algerian crisis – i.e., political participation and representation. This enables the regime to deny the possibility that the crisis can be resolved through negotiations – or at best, that the time for negotiations is now past – and that what is left to do is merely to crush the remaining wayward and scattered groups. For instance, according to ambassador Lamamra,

> Some of the terrorist groups, which have been announcing since the month of October of last year[97] their decision to put an end to their terrorist activity, had been motivated by the dead end in which they found themselves. That has not been the result of negotiation between anyone in the government and/or any politician claiming to speak for the FIS. [...] The cessation of activity on the part of several groups [...] has had a somewhat positive impact on the security situation, but it does not have any political significance, as it is not the result of any political discussion or negotiation.[98]

Insisting that the terrorist threat faced by the state is 'residual' is useful for a second reason: it allows the state to argue that solving the security problem is imminently within reach and that therefore what it needs is not help in resolving the political conflict – since there is no political conflict – but in crushing once and for all the remaining hoards of criminals. 'When you speak of mediation, you speak of civil war. In Algeria, there is no civil war,' ambassador Dembri explained.[99] 'Algeria is an independent, sovereign country with a parliamentary democracy and institutions and is capable of solving its own problems,' minister Attaf stated. 'We do not accept any interference in our affairs,'[100] even if should this 'interference' come in the form of humanitarian aid to the victims of violence. 'Algeria has no need for humanitarian aid, though it is appreciative of the offer.'[101]

4.2. Limited Resources

The claim of 'residual terrorism' is part and parcel of a two-tiered strategy adopted by the Algerian regime in its effort to sell its version of the conflict to the international community. The term 'residual' in itself connotes progress from an earlier state where the terrorism was endemic, but it also points to the reality that terrorism persists. The theme that Algeria is making progress, as we have seen, is crucial to the Algerian authorities in their image re-making efforts. The challenge for the authorities is therefore to cast the violence that persists in terms that do not negate or take away from the overall image that Algeria is making progress, as it claims it is. The best way

to accomplish this is to explain the failure to achieve total eradication of terrorism by pointing to material limitations. That is, the reason why the state has not been able to completely eradicate the violence is because the state lacks the necessary means to wage the final battle, implying that, with more material resources, the defeat of the enemy can at long last be achieved.

Here, then, the argument is that the state is doing all it can with whatever resources it has, but that it can do more if it did have more.[102] As General Kamel Abderrahmane, commander of the western Algeria military region, candidly put it, warning residents of the Relizane area to form pro-government militias, 'people must either arm or take refuge in towns [...]. The state does not have the means to put a soldier in front of every house.'[103] One must note that the General articulated his warning in January 1998, that is, months after the massacres in Sidi Rais and Bentalha – both outskirts of Algiers, hardly an isolated area – where the atrocities took place a few hundred yards from security installations. For an even more explicit articulation of this position, we turn again to ambassador Lamamra testimony. The ambassador insisted that 'the Algerian government has been devoting 100% of its capacities to terrorism prevention and suppression', but complained that Algeria's size was four times that of the size of the state of Texas, that Algeria had many borders and many vital installations, and that 80% of the Algerian army was composed of conscripts.

By rationalising the failure of the authorities in material rather than political or moral terms, the regime can then proceed to ask the international community for a very specific kind of help: material and logistical help in combating 'terrorism', rather than moral and legal help to mediate in a political conflict. As ambassador Dembri put it, as usual not mincing his words: 'There is no human rights crisis in Algeria, but rather the phenomenon of international terrorism.'[104]

4.3. An International Crisis

The proposition that the terrorism faced by Algerians is 'residual' – preposterous as it may be, once the facts are consulted – is useful for many reasons: for arguing against undertaking a political solution – there is no point in negotiating a political settlement when facing 'residual' terrorism; and for denying the necessity for international mediation and scrutiny – we have the instruments and the institutions to solve our problems ourselves. Ironically, the same two effects can be achieved by claiming the exact opposite proposition that the terrorism faced is not residual but rather one that afflicts the whole world. 'Among the new challenges the international community faces,' minister Attaf announced, 'terrorism is the one which apparently is the most challenging.' The reasoning is that if terrorism is world-wide, then its causes are not local to Algeria, and hence there is no sense in attempting

to seek an indigenous political solution to the crisis. This line of reasoning was eloquently articulated in a joint statement issued by Algeria's ambassador to Russia, Amar Makhlou, and Russian justice minister Sergei Stepashin, where they explained that 'the problem of terrorism should not be viewed as a political problem and common bandits should not be regarded as political figures'.[105]

Moreover, if the problem is an international one, the reasoning goes on, conferences and conventions about '*terrorism*' should be organized, rather than rapporteurs or investigative teams sent to Algeria to look more closely into what is taking place there. An internationalisation along such lines is therefore most welcome since it achieves the salutary effect of distracting from the local causes of the conflict, thereby shifting attention to the nebulous threat of 'international terror'. In the words of Algeria's ambassador to Japan, Boudjemaa Delmi, 'We need the support of the international community to combat these terrorists',[106] while minister Attaf said approvingly: 'We should welcome the awareness of the international community, which has emerged as to the real nature of this phenomenon and which has been accompanied by greater mobilization of effort against this scourge.'[107]

Of course, the minister is playing, and with great effect, on one of the most prevalent of international narratives: the scourge of 'fanatic Islamic terrorism', a discourse to which Western powers are quite acutely receptive. But what is worth noting is that the political pose Algeria is striking today on the international scene, and the alarmist rhetoric it has adopted, is a recent occurrence that stands in sharp contrast with Algeria's traditional position and character. Since its independence and until recently, Algeria presented itself on the world scene, and with remarkable consistency, as a staunch supporter of all movements for self-determination. For a long time, and since its independence in 1962, Algeria was also one of the most outspoken critics of the long-standing Western double standard of demonizing any struggle, armed or peaceful, that sought to establish some measure of true popular independence, while legitimizing authoritarian and brutal regimes on grounds that they represented the last and only reliable check against the malignant advance of the enemies of civilization. Communism, until its demise, presented the most convenient bogeyman and served the United States well in its justification for supporting a long list of brutal regimes.

However, beginning from 1994, Algeria's long-standing anti-imperialist and nationalist identity underwent a major shift, or, perhaps more accurately, experienced a split into two parallel, but mutually contradictory personalities. In its desperate attempt to refashion for itself a new legitimacy it had suddenly and spectacularly lost with the abrupt halting of the democratic process, the regime found itself unable to sustain its long-standing rhetoric of liberation and self-determination. First, the old rhetoric now ringed quite hollow, since the regime had itself engaged in obstructing a process of inter-

nal self-determination. But perhaps more importantly, the regime could no longer sustain its traditional nationalistic defiance because it was becoming more and more internationally isolated and shunned by Western governments. With no elected president, no parliament, no local assemblies, and an indefinitely instated state of emergency, Algeria suddenly found itself on the margins in the world scene.

It is during this period – between January 1992 and November 1995 – that the Algerian diplomacy shifted its traditional role of advocate and spokesman for Third World causes – decolonisation, anti-imperialism, political self determination, economic equity – to the mainstream Western discourse of anti-terrorism, anti-fundamentalism, anti-fanaticism, etc. This is not to say that the old discourse has been altogether abandoned. As we have already seen, when convenient, officials still lapse to the old discourse of colonization and national struggles (especially when France is the target of criticism). But at the same time, concrete steps have been taken in an attempt to seek allies within the Western camp. Iran, Sudan, Afghanistan, old friends, are suddenly cast away as 'rogue states' and to the 'other side' of the divide, with Algeria firmly aligning itself on the side of 'civilisation'.[108] Now, Algeria is facing, along with the rest of the civilized world, the same challenges, the same threats and hazards, that all modern nations were facing: 'international terrorism'. No longer able to proactively forge its own legitimacy, the regime now seeks to achieve that legitimacy by association.

To Algerians and observers familiar with recent Algerian history, the clearest signal that a fundamental breach with the past had indeed taken place came in the form of 13 March 1996, Sharm El-Sheikh anti-terrorism conference convened by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. The conference was called in the aftermath of attacks on Israel that had left 61 people dead, thereby threatening the collapse of the fragile Peace Process between the Palestinians and the Israelis. In the words of President Mubarak, the conference aimed at 'restoring the peace process, condemning terrorism and organizing an international effort to deal with terrorism'.[109] The conference was attended by 29 leaders from throughout the world and had two aims: to support Israel, traumatized at the time by a rash of suicide bombings, and to establish the framework for the long-term fight against terrorism. Among the attendees were US President Bill Clinton, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, French President Jacques Chirac, British prime minister John Major, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and delegations from Israel, Turkey, Japan, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Yemen, among others. One of the 'others' was Algeria, a shocking event for those familiar with the traditional Algerian stand. Indeed, it was the first time that Algeria had appeared, and with such intense visibility, in the same official forum as Israel, let alone join a forum that had been convened specifically to support Israel. However, it is not hard to understand, once we grasp the extent to which the Algerian re-

gime was desperate for new legitimacy on the international scene (at the expense of legitimization within, which had at that point sunk to new lows), that the temptation to be counted among the 'civilised' was too great to resist.

It is not a coincidence that this line of argument – i.e., that Algeria, along with the world at large, is facing the global mortal scourge of terrorism – possesses the additional virtue of absolving the regime from its responsibilities: the violence that is faced by innocent civilians is more akin to a disease that is itself its own origin and that knows no boundaries or jurisdictions, rather than a conflict with its perpetrators and its victims.

4.4. A Unique Problem

Since it should be clear by now that the Algerian authorities are not overly fastidious about the overall coherence of their protests, it should not come as a shock to discover that among the rhetorical strategies one might find in the Algerian diplomatic bag of tricks is the proposition that what Algeria is facing is a 'unique' problem, one that has not visited humanity any time before or any where else. In the words of prime minister Ahmed Ouyahia, reacting to one of the bloodiest massacres, in Rais, that claimed more than 300 lives, Algeria was facing 'the most horrible form of criminality and terrorism known to humanity'.[110] Not that the prime minister was speaking from shock or emotion: as early as April 1997, before some of the most spectacular massacres were to take place, we find the prime minister speaking in even more scandalized terms: 'the horrible massacres perpetrated by barbaric and savage terrorism have no precedent through the centuries and the continents.'[111] Minister Attaf, echoing his prime minister, was no less emphatic: 'the terrorism that Algeria is living today is without precedent in the whole history of humanity.'[112]

The proposition that the problem confronted by Algeria is a unique problem and that the violence faced is unprecedented in its savagery, is aimed at inciting the world to react in a very specific way. The savagery is indeed astonishing and seemingly incomprehensible. The scale of the massacres, the ghastly cruelty with which the killings are perpetrated, and the cowardice of the killers in choosing poor and defenseless victims, all represent irrefutable proof that the authorities are confronting not political rebels open to rational discourse, but pure criminals to be eliminated. At least this is what the authorities wish us to believe. This then narrows down the type of help sought by the government to material assistance rather than political mediation. Equally important is the significant psychological effect that the 'uniqueness' argument has on attempts to establish an explanatory model for what is taking place in Algeria: what good will it do to impose rationality on an inherently irrational situation? Although this by itself is no explanation, the psy-

chological effect the irrationality argument has on observers of the Algerian situation should not be ignored.

5. Conclusions

Algeria's representatives to the world, its diplomats, have mobilized an impressive array of rhetorical strategies in their attempt to absolve their government of its numerous flagrant failings. We have here touched only on some of them. Some of those strategies are defensive and are aimed at silencing criticism by (a) dividing the world into two and holding all those who do not side with the Algerian view of the world the abettors of barbarous terror, (b) attacking the integrity and moral probity of those who dare criticize or accuse the authorities, or (c) dismissing as false any allegations on grounds of insufficient proof. Other strategies take the offensive and consist in asserting that the state enjoys the very qualities that critics may claim it lacks. Here the strategies all share in common the characteristic that what is being asserted is asserted on thin formal grounds that a minimum amount of research would readily negate. But the assertions are made nonetheless, since, ludicrous as they may sound to anyone familiar to any reasonable extent with the Algerian context, the audience to which they are often targeted will probably not know enough to reject the claims out of hand. Hence, the assertion is made that (a) Algeria is respectful of human rights, since it is signatory to international human rights treaties; (b) Algeria is open and transparent to the world and that it has nothing to hide, since it has granted entry into Algeria to journalists and other foreign officials; (c) Algeria is democratic since it has a popularly elected president, a popularly adopted constitution, a popularly elected multiparty parliament and popularly elected local representation; and (d) the Algerian state is solicitous of the safety of its citizens since, without its help, hundreds more would have died. A third set of strategies, taking neither the defensive nor the offensive, are employed to mitigate the failings of the state by claiming that: (a) the terrorist threat is a diminishing one; (b) the state has limited resources; (c) the crisis faced by Algeria is an international one; and (d) the crisis Algeria faces is a uniquely pernicious problem.

Aside the breathtaking discord between the facts on the ground and the version of the world peddled by the diplomats, the strategies, as we also saw, suffer the additional defect of not hanging particularly well together. They suffer, however, the even greater flaw that they do not bring us any closer to accepting the claim that the authorities – whose duty it is to protect civilians – are not themselves involved in the execution of atrocities. If anything, they achieve, by their obvious and awkward attempt to obfuscate, the exact opposite effect of heightening our worst fears and suspicions.

NOTES

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[8] *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 7 January 1998.

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[11] *Reuters*, 8 October 1997.

[12] *Reuters*, 19 November1997.

[13] Evelyn Leopold, 'Annan and Robinson condemn atrocities in Algeria', *Reuters,* 30 September 1997.

[14] Ibid.

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[16] *Le Soir de Belgique*, 27 January 1997.

[17] Ramtane Lamamra, 'Situation In Algeria: Congressional Testimony, 02-05-1998', *Federal Document Clearing House, Inc*, 5 February 1998.

[18] Mohamed Salah Dembri, 'Droit de reponse de la delegation algerienne aux declarations d'Amnesty International et de la FIDH, point 10', 14 April 1998.

[19] *AFP*, 29 October 1997.

[20] Mohamed Salah Dembri, 'Droit de reponse de la delegation algerienne aux declarations d'Amnesty International et de la FIDH, point 10', 14 April 1998.

[21] Ibid.

[22] *AFP*, 6 January 1998.

[23] Maurice Pappon was being tried at the time for organizing the deportation of Jews during German occupation. Pappon was also Paris police commissioner (prefet de police de Paris) when in October 1961, after a demonstration by Algerians in Paris, hundreds of Algerian workers were thrown in the Seine; many drowned. *AFP*, 8 October 1997.

[24] Mohamed Salah Dembri, 'Droit de reponse de la delegation algerienne aux declarations d'Amnesty International et de la FIDH, point 10', 14 April 1998.

[25] *AFP*, 8 October 1997.

[26] Anthony Loyd, 'Zeroual's zombies cast vote', *The Times*, 24 October 1997.

[27] Robert Moore, 'Hands that wield Algeria's knives', *The Observer*, 26 October 1997.

[28] *The Guardian*, 24 September 1997.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Mohamed Salah Dembri, 'Droit de reponse de la delegation algerienne aux declarations d'Amnesty International et de la FIDH, point 10', 14 April 1998.

[31] Ramtane Lamamra, 'Situation In Algeria: Congressional Testimony, 02-05-1998', *Federal Document Clearing House, Inc.*, 5 February 1998.

[32] *L'Humanite*, 10 January 1998.

[33] *La Tribune*, 22 March 1998.

[34] John Sweeney, 'The military is torturing and killing its way to victory over Islamists in June poll', *The Observer,* 25 May 1997.

[35] 'Algerie: la guerre civile a huits clos', *Reporters sans frontieres*, March 1997, p.5.

[36] 'Human Rights Watch letter addressed to Mohamed Adami, Minister of Justice', 26 April 1997.

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[45] *Reuters*, 24 October 1997.

[46] *Le Quotidien*, 7 February 1998.

[47] 'L'Algerie a sa part de credibilite dans l'arene internationale', *La Tribune*, 22 March 1998.

[48] 'Algerie: la guerre civile a huits clos', *Reporters sans Frontieres*, March 1997.

[49] Mark Dennis, *Newsweek* reporter, was arrested and spent two nights in jail before being thrown out of the country for failing to comply with the prohibition on journalists to move anywhere in the country without security officer escorts. 'Hurt, But Not Yet Beaten', *Newsweek*, 30 June 1997.

[50] Mohamed Salah Dembri, 'Intervention de S.E. Monsieur l'Ambassadeur Mohamed-Salah Dembri: Point 3: Organization des travaux', 22 April 1998.

[51] *L'Humanite*, 10 January 1998.

[52] *Dernieres Nouvelles D'Alsace,* 15 January 1998.

[53] *Le Quotidien*, 7 February 1998.

[54] Ibid.

[55] 'Algerie: la guerre civile a huits clos', *Reporters sans Frontieres*, March 1997, p. 7.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid, p. 8.

[58] Ibid, p. 14.

[59] *AP*, 23 October 1998.

[60] 'Algerie: la guerre civile a huits clos', *Reporters sans Frontieres*, March 1997, p. 15.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid, p. 4.

[64] Peter W. Rodman (former White House and State Department official, now Director of National Security Programs at the Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom), *Middle East Quarterly*, December 1996.

[65] Mona Yacoubian, 'Algeria's Struggle for Democracy: Prospects for Incremental Change', *Studies Department Occasional Paper Series*, No. 3, Council on Foreign Relations, 1997.

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[67] Ibid.

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[94] *Dernieres nouvelles d'Alsace,* 2 March 1997.

[95] *Dernieres Nouvelles D'Alsace,* 7 November 1997.

[96] *The Washington Post*, 23 September 1997.

[97] The ambassador is referring here to the unilateral cease fire called by the armed wing of the FIS, the AIS, in October 1997.

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[101] *Reuters*, 8 January 1998.

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[111] *Liberte,* 29 April 1997.

[112] *AFP*, 6 October 1997.