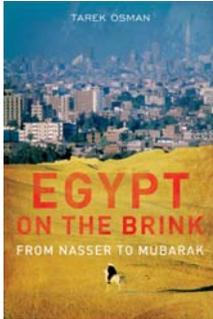


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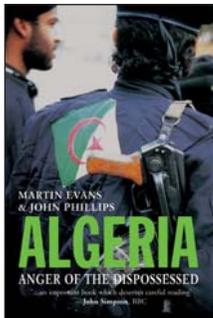
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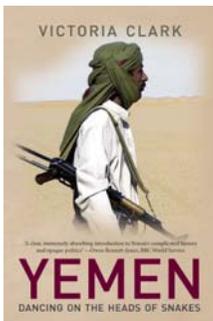
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* * *

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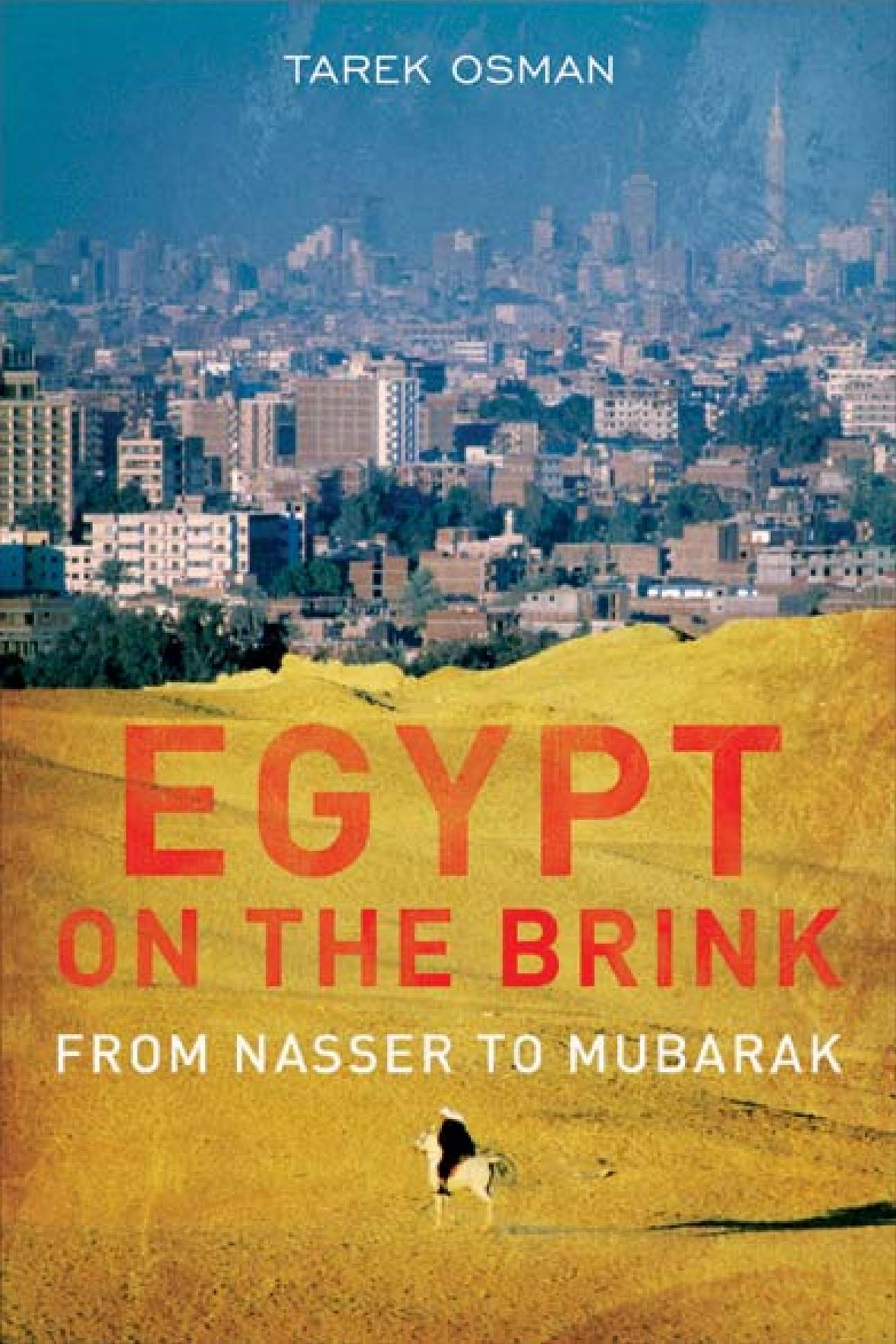
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TAREK OSMAN

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

FROM NASSER TO MUBARAK

CHAPTER 7

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

EGYPT'S CURRENT STATE resembles a surrealist painting. It is difficult to decipher its components, challenging to comprehend its meaning. At the centre of the painting there are dark, abrasive lines; most onlookers would see them depicting anger, frustration and occasionally menace.

The painting's most conspicuous ominous line is the country's 45 million young Egyptians who are under thirty-five years of age (including the largest group of adolescents in the country's history). The conditions in which many of these millions live may be somewhat caricatured in much of the foreign media: neighbourhoods with absolute poverty, unreliable services and shabby buildings with peeling facades; millions of veiled young women, some as young as eight or nine years old, with long sleeves and skirts; narrow alleys with uncollected garbage and open cesspools; amplifiers and radio systems blaring out Koran recitations on every corner; disagreeable-looking crowds in vastly compacted streets; and, most strikingly, millions of young men, with wild eyes and dusty faces, usually captured on cameras

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

shouting, screaming, burning flags and described as 'forces of menace', 'angry storms' and 'frustrated potential energy'. This caricaturing often depicts Egyptian society in lurid colours that miss its many shades and variations.

But even a more straightforward description is sobering enough.¹ More thorough observers highlight the institutionalization of corruption, the frightening increase in the rate and change in type of crime; a rooted disregard for human dignity; the descent of society's values and behaviours; and shifts in society's value system, particularly reflected in violent crimes perpetrated by teachers, students, businessmen and other members of the middle class. In 2008, a nine-year-old boy was abducted from Cairo to Tanta, where his body was found dismembered and mutilated. In the same year, a teacher was arrested for fatally injuring an eleven-year-old student for failing to do his homework. There is also a growing incidence of sexual harassment; the most notorious case was during celebrations in Cairo at the end of the holy month of Ramadan in 2007, which turned into a crazed series of sexual assaults by dozens of young men on female passers-by. 'People were just watching,' one eyewitness said. In addition, several shocking cases of sexual assault have drawn attention to a complex of social problems in Egypt, the most notable of which are street children: thousands of boys and girls, some arriving as young as five and six years old, living in dirty alleys and gritty corners under bridges, sleeping on pavements and in public gardens, begging or selling used and repackaged products at traffic lights and junctions, all fleeing poverty, abuse and exploitation.

Hardship is not only breeding crime and neglect, but also crudeness and coarseness. Cutting up and zigzag driving have become common features of Cairene and Alexandrian traffic. The sound of horns is the hysterical background music of the Egyptian

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

street at any hour of the day and night. Drivers and passers-by typically shout at and curse each other. Standing in lines is now a rare phenomenon at any Egyptian retail or service outlet. Using profanities is very common on the Egyptian street, and increasingly among children. The street is also tense and agitated. Voices are loud. Fights begin for frivolous reasons. 'People seem ready to leap at each others' throats over seemingly trivial matters. The culture of tolerance that long existed among Egyptians is on the decline,' noted sociologist Samir Hanna.² And the classic Egyptian tradition of gentlemanliness (*shabama*), as featured in Egyptian black-and-white films, has died out. 'How do you expect a man who's been working sixteen hours, to leave his seat on the bus for a woman or an elderly man? Or if he stops after that long day to buy bread, why should he let a woman ahead? When you're being enslaved by the system, you don't really care about manners,' said a young man in a survey by *Al-Abram Weekly*.³

'Egypt is becoming a very harsh place' is a common sentiment. Many are desperately trying to flee. In 2006, around 8 million Egyptians (more than 10 per cent of the population, the vast majority of whom were under forty years of age) applied for the American green-card lottery; Egyptians are among the top five nationalities applying to Canada's points-based immigration-approval scheme. From the mid-2000s, thousands of young Egyptians risked their lives attempting to reach the southern shores of Greece and Italy in search of work there or in countries to the north. According to a January 2008 report by the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, 'around half a million Egyptians have successfully entered Europe illegally in the 2000s'. Increasingly, hundreds of young, poor Egyptians are picked up from tiny boats in the Mediterranean by Libyan coast guards and incarcerated in Libyan prisons (hardly an escape from their lives in Egypt).

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

The tough economic circumstances (official unemployment in the under-30 age group is around 21 per cent, almost double the overall total⁴) help explain this desperate response. Unemployment is partly the result of the major economic changes of the 1990s and 2000s and poor education – for example, most state universities' business graduates do not come into contact with a computer, and accordingly fail to secure jobs in the private sector. But part of the problem stems from antiquated attitudes; many university graduates prefer to remain unemployed than work in blue-collar or labouring jobs.

But such 'opting out' is not the preserve of the poor. More than a million Egyptian postgraduates now live in Europe and the United States; the vast majority will most likely never go back to live in Egypt⁵ – and increasingly have very tenuous links to their original country. The range of problems inside Egypt (increasing sectarianism, the prevalence of corruption, the lack of the rule of law and the deterioration in values) compels fresh generations to emulate them. Mayar, a thirty-something economist who graduated in the top 5 per cent of her class, underwent the long administrative process to gain Canadian citizenship because she 'does not want her daughter brought up in Egypt'.

But there is another form of 'opting out', a sort of internal migration by those who stay in the country but seek to insulate themselves from its difficulties – and are prosperous enough to make the effort. Egypt's macro-economic progress has seen consumer expenditure per capita (at purchasing power parity) grow between 2000 and 2008 from \$2,647 to \$3,672; for the richest 20 per cent of the population, the figures were \$5,770 and \$8,000. Those who benefited from that wave have increasingly retreated from the hustle and bustle of society to lead secluded, isolated lives. The well-paid telecoms engineer in his mid-thirties (and his friends, the IT consultant, the accountant at a leading

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

local company, the sales executive in a multinational, the banker, the doctor) are increasingly drawn to the Internet, to satellite dishes and even the express-delivery service of Amazon UK. If his financial situation improves significantly, his immediate objective becomes a home in one of the new, rich and isolated suburbs of Cairo, from where he and his wife will send their children to a new private school and attend a secluded, members-only sports and social club. The psychological isolation and the emotional detachment slowly, gradually and subtly instil a feeling among such people that there is a major civilization gap between them (and their neat world) and the rest of their society.

The retreat from city centres to peripheral areas is also part of a wider change in Egyptians' relationship with their land. Egypt's urban constellations (mainly Cairo and Alexandria, but also Al-Mahala, Tanta, Al-Zakazeek and Asyut) and their surrounding areas are in constant flux with both population growth and internal migration (mainly from Al-Saeed and the remote parts of the Delta – now around 800,000 annually). Egyptians were increasingly condensed in the centres as well as fragmented at the peripheries. Between the 1960s and the 2000s, Cairo grew from 6 million inhabitants to more than 15 million. The city's density, at more than 1,000 individuals per square kilometre, is among the highest in the world, and Alexandria is not far behind. The exuberance, energy and waves of creativity that characterized Cairo and Alexandria throughout the twentieth century were giving way to suffocating crowdedness, domineering compactness and stifling closeness. At the same time, the rich and the upper middle class were deserting the city centres and the old neighbourhoods for new suburbs, opting for gated communities on the outskirts, detached not only from the over-crowding and the increasingly ailing infrastructure, but also from the historic neighbourhoods and quarters that have witnessed and shaped

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

Egyptians' interaction with their physical space throughout decades (and at times centuries).

Cairo's centre, Zamalek, Garden City and Maadi were increasingly shadows of their former selves. New boutiques, restaurants and shopping centres continue to open up, but the city's centre of gravity has moved to the Sixth of October, Palm Hills, City Views, Allegría, the Fifth Settlement, Al-Obour and Al-Shorouk – new rich, immaculate and spacious communities, but lacking Cairo's and Alexandria's long and rich touches (and scars) of history.⁶

As a result, for the first time in Egypt's history many people live, work and socialize far from the city centre, leaving its landmarks – the centuries-old mosques and churches, the baroque buildings and palaces of Ismael Pasha, the Corniche's boulevards, the busy streets of Adly, Embaba and Shoubra – neglected. Egyptians' attachment to their physical heritage is diminishing; the burning of Al-Musafir Khana (an eighteenth-century Mameluke guest house) in 2007 and of Majlis Al-Shoura (a modern Islamic architectural gem) in 2008 went almost unnoticed (Gamal Al-Ghitanni's *Regaining Al-Musafir Khana*⁷ transcends its purpose of describing the lost house, and emerges as a tribute to Egypt's 'old devotion to its emotional heritage').

In a lecture in Paris in the mid-1990s, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal offered a revealing analogy. He noted that the French urban engineer Haussmann, the designer of the Rue de Rivoli and the Boulevard de Sebastopol, was the same man who designed the Mohamed Ali Street in Cairo. But while the Rue de Rivoli and Boulevard de Sebastopol remain 'a front of civilization in the city of Light', 'lights have gone off on central Cairo's civilization fronts'; Cairo's old Opera House has been replaced by a multi-storey parking block.

It was not only the rich and the upper middle class who deserted the city centres; the newcomers (the millions who left

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

the rural areas for Cairo and Alexandria) and the newly poor (the other millions who had crumbled under the crippling socio-economic conditions in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s) were compelled to live in detached spaces on the peripheries of the Egyptian metropolises. Cairo's City of the Dead is the most conspicuous: an area of more than 8 square kilometres where (at least) 4 million poor Cairenes live and work in a crowded grid of tombs and mausoleums, forming a quasi-independent community. Many aspects of it are distressing, from the hundreds of thousands of children deprived of basic education to the lack of sanitation, but the city is also a beacon of creativity and make-do. Electricity is typically brought in by wires over roofs from nearby mosques or public spaces; rooms are modelled to suit living requirements;⁸ and cooperative income sources are constantly invented. Similar circumstances, though on a smaller scale, exist in Garbage Village, home to more than 50,000 garbage workers (and their families), whose lives, like those of the millions living in the City of the Dead, are disconnected from proper Cairo (Mai Iskander's *Garbage Dreams*, a film independently produced in 2009, is a poignant, emotive and intriguing portrayal of life in Garbage Village).

A change in the relationship with Egyptians' physical space has also occurred in the Egyptian Delta and Al-Saeed. The fragmentation in ownership of cultivated land, the encroachment of construction on the Nile's soil and waves of internal immigration are some components of the change. Land is no longer the sole (or even the main) source of income for most Delta or Saeedi families, the quasi-sacred asset that housed the entire family to be passed from one generation to another. Yousef Chahine's 1969 film *The Land (Al-Ard)*, adapted from a novel by Abdelrahman Al-Sharkawi, brought the daily life of poor Egyptian farmers to the screen: their voices and clothes, their grinding work through

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

sweltering days and tranquil nights, the smell of cows and chicken in their homes, their faint smiles, their dignity and poverty, their superstitiousness, and – above all – their almost-sacred attachment to their land. In the film's last scene, the ageing villager who had stood up against overlordship (played by the actor Mahmoud Al-Meligui) is brutally punished: his feet bound, his body tied to the legs of a horse ridden by the village sheriff, so that his clothes are torn and his body bleeds. Yet as he is dragged along, his hand clutches at the mud, the soil. He refuses to let go, to abandon his land, his home, his life. The audience – millions of whom wept while watching this scene – almost questioned whether Al-Meligui's hands were clutching the earth, or the earth was clutching him.⁹ That deep attachment to and recognition of the sanctity of the land is vanishing.

Egypt's demographic changes have exacerbated this process. The near-doubling of the Egyptian population since the 1970s has turned the Egyptian demographic structure into a pyramid – extremely narrow at the top and enormously wide at the bottom, with very limited conduits between the few millions in their fifties, sixties and seventies and the 45 million-plus under thirty-five years of age.¹⁰ The fading generation is carrying off with it the classic compositions of the Egyptian character and the reservoir of the Egyptian personality, while the incoming, increasingly dominant generation is hardly receiving any cultural heritage. The new generation never fought (or witnessed) a war; never lived with a national project; grew up at a time in which the country was undergoing a surgical transformation (the move from Nasserite secular, socialist Arab nationalism to Islamism, and later capitalism, through Sadat's *al-infitab*). It was a tense period. The new generation lived through an almost open war between the state and groups bent not only on overthrowing the regime, but on transforming the entire society. Sectarianism and

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

the conspicuous withdrawal of Egyptian Christians that intensified in the same period (from the 1970s to the 2000s) deprived society of diversity and vital breathing space, previously achieved through traditional interactions with Europe and Western culture in general. Even the relationship between the regime (and especially the president) and the people during those decades was stressful: the regime asserted its authority, at times with severe coercion and utter disregard for human rights, without forging the classic emotional links between the pharaoh (or the figure-head of the Egyptian family, as President Sadat preferred to say) and his subjects. All of these factors contributed to a tense and agitated society. The millions of young Egyptians were stepping into a stressed (and stressing) social milieu.

Egyptians are keenly aware of their regression and relapse over the past four decades. And the more the regime, via its sponsored media, has stuck to notions of 'Egyptian leadership and headship', the more the realities of daily life confirmed the deterioration. Saudi's political prominence (as compared to the retreat of Egyptian foreign policy in the past three decades, discussed in Chapter 6), the Gulf's wealth, Lebanon's creativity and *joie de vivre*, Jordan's rejuvenation (under a young, energetic royal couple) and Dubai's glamour reminded Egyptians of their ailing conditions and unfortunate situation. Blame flew everywhere, from the mismanagement and corruption of successive governments to the dysfunctional system, to the regime's shady governance, to the decline in society's values. Within the many morbid symptoms of the fracturing of the social order and national regression, a shared feeling has emerged: that 'something has gone wrong' (*'fee haga ghalat'*) in society and values, and in the heritage available to the young, rising generation.

Indeed, the classic channels of cultural transmission have become seriously frayed. The 1970s and 1980s was a low period in

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

Egyptian culture. Many newspapers, magazines, theatres, cinemas and cultural avenues were closed down; thousands of writers, journalists, professors and artists were obliged to leave the country. Wahhabism and Salafism gained ground in social attitudes and norms as well as politics. The regime, during Sadat's last years and throughout Mubarak's containment, confrontation and coercion years, had low tolerance of dissidents and dissenters. And with the retreat in the role of Egyptian Christians and society's change of orientation from progressive liberalism and a fascination with Europe towards conservatism and religiosity, classic Egyptian culture has been hollowed out and homogenized.

The deterioration of Egypt's educational system is a further negative factor. Though elementary education (from ages six to fourteen) is compulsory in Egypt, and though more than 19 million Egyptians between the ages of six and eighteen, representing around 90 per cent of all school-age children, were enrolled in 2008 in the country's pre-university education system (taking Egypt's overall literacy rate to circa 71 per cent after decades of hovering at 50 per cent), the system as a whole is in trouble, with falling enrolments, poor teacher-student ratios and persistent gender inequality. Actual school enrolments in rural areas often fall below 50 per cent of all school-age children. School drop-outs, especially in Egypt's poorest regions (mainly Al-Saeed) or the rougher neighbourhoods of Cairo and Alexandria, reach 20-25 per cent of all enrolment figures. Gender inequality continues to persist. Girls' enrolment ratios are typically around 20 per cent lower than those of boys, and drop-out ratios are higher.

The infrastructure of schools is a chronic problem. Classes in public schools often include more than sixty or seventy students. Teacher-student ratios in most schools are around one to fifty. Playgrounds, let alone music, art rooms or laboratories, are a rarity. English is a part of the curriculum in the preparatory and

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

secondary stages, but the quality of teaching and students' command of the language leave much to be desired. And private tutoring continues to be a major challenge: highly expensive and therefore the exclusive domain of affluent families, it disrupts the supposed equality of the educational process. In the mid-2000s, around 60 per cent of families in the major cities stated that their children had private tutoring. According to Egypt's Central Statistics and Mobilisation Agency (CAPMAS), more than 60 per cent of all investments in education are spent on private tutoring. At university level, the links to international centres of excellence and innovation are paltry; there is a major retreat in research and development, a thriving clandestine trade in class notes and examination essays and little emphasis on independent knowledge and learning as opposed to passing exams and receiving a degree.¹¹

These processes – a change in the country's value system, detachment from society, the gap between generations, the weakening of Egyptian culture, the deterioration in the educational system and the damage to the most sacred of the tenets of Egyptianism, the land – have altered Egyptians' link to each other and their country. The millions of young Egyptians entering the country's public life need to re-establish these links, in order to make sense of their lives and their society. It would seem natural to look to politics as the avenue of change here; but the young generation's contribution is not welcomed in public policy or decision-making circles. Within the ruling National Democratic Party, Gamal Mubarak's wing, especially in its years of ascension (from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s) was keen on positioning itself as a wave of well-educated, young Egyptians with a strong interest in the country's public life. But with the maturing of that wing, and its establishment at the pinnacle of the party and the regime, the young faces and the youth

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

organizations that Gamal Mubarak had championed (for example, The Future Foundation) have been relegated to the background. What remains around the regime's strong man are scions of ultra-rich families and symbols of liberal capitalism.

The same dynamics have been at work in the Muslim Brotherhood. The vigour and drive that had characterized the Brotherhood in the early 2000s (and which led to its 2005 manifesto, parliamentary election success and strong presence across a number of prominent societal circles) waned. The many young Brotherhood members, who had surrounded Mahdi Akef (the general guide) in that period, were gradually dispersed; the Brotherhood's decision-making channels, power circles and public faces remained old and tired. Even the Kefaya movement, the country's most prominent civic opposition group in the 2000s, did not manage to extend its appeal (or membership) to significant numbers of young Egyptians. Its rhetoric (highbrow and concerned with political failures rather than the ragged realities of ordinary people's daily lives) resonated with the intelligentsia much more than with the millions of university students. A partial exception has been the liberal opposition represented by Aziz Siddqui's platform of the mid-2000s and, later, Ayman Noor's *Al-Ghad* party; but they are too weak and marginalized to be a viable forum. Not surprisingly, the political participation rate of young Egyptians is dismal, even by the standards of the Arab world (according to the 2009 Arab Human Development Report, only 28 per cent participated in the 2005 parliamentary election and 23 per cent in the 2005 presidential election).

But their dynamism and activism has found other outlets – mainly cultural. The vacuum that needed to be filled stirred the creativity of thousands of young (twenty- and thirty-something) writers, film-makers, singers and musicians. Egyptian cinema in the 2000s, with new twists, stories, scripts, innovations in visual

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

effects, shooting styles and higher production values, more than tripled its revenues from the levels of early or mid-1990s. Production budgets are now routinely US\$3–5 million, if not more.¹² Distribution has expanded from the classic markets of the Gulf and Levant to North Africa, and increasingly to the world cinema circles in Europe. From 2004 onwards, at least one Egyptian film was presented every year at Cannes Film Festival. And there were serious attempts at participating in innovative gatherings such as Tribeca in New York and Sundance in Utah. The same development took place in Egyptian music: innovations (and in many cases refreshing unorthodoxy) in tones, mixes, melodies and visuals drew more listeners, opened new markets and generated more revenues. Egyptian music and artists won the prestigious World Music Award three times between 1998 and 2007.

Even reading, a long-lost cause in Egypt, has witnessed a revival. The Arabic (and in many cases illegal) translations of the Harry Potter books and *The Lord of the Rings*, the rising penetration of the Internet in cafés and public spaces, in addition to the popularity of blogs and chatrooms, triggered an enthusiasm for reading, writing and critiquing. So far another Naguib Mahfouz, Yousef Idris¹³ or even Alaa Al-Aswany¹⁴ has not emerged, but thousands of young writers are experimenting with new themes, structures and language (an evolution of Egyptian slang).¹⁵ One refreshing example is ‘El Koshary Today’,¹⁶ an English-language ‘fake news website’, modelled on the highly successful satirical ‘The Onion’ in the United States, and launched by three twenty-something Egyptians. With its tongue-in-cheek hilarity and uproarious directness, El Koshary Today has managed to attract a dedicated and increasing fan base.

Young Egyptians’ dynamism has also set off a wave of innovation in Egypt’s business and finance scene. The Egyptian

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

computing and information-technology industry, though tiny in size and highly concentrated in terms of professionals and entities, boasts excellent education centres (especially at The American University in Cairo), a number of highly successful companies with international clientele and sales distribution, and an increasingly high reputation. Young Egyptians also created and led the Middle East's, the Arab world's and Africa's most successful investment bank, private equity firm, telecoms operator and construction conglomerate – all with spectacular successes throughout the 2000s. And, more interestingly, even at the core of the society's socio-economic life, away from the industries and sectors that require sophistication, exposure to the West and access to mega-funding, thousands of young Egyptians have created tens of thousands of small businesses and enterprises in numerous sectors, from small textile workshops to fast food restaurants, to taxi fleets, to diving centres. By the end of 2008, Egypt's Ministry of Trade was processing more than 2,000 new company registrations every week. Adam Smith's invisible hand was very much in action throughout the 2000s, promoting creativity, ingenuity and resourcefulness. There is a dominant view that Egyptians, as a result of their centuries-old agricultural culture, are lacking in terms of entrepreneurialism. In fact, the production of – and trading in – raw cotton, textiles, dyeing, silk, sugar and wheat gained immense economic importance through Egyptians' long experience with agriculture and farming. The concentration of funding in a few centres and circles, however, has restricted the emergence of an agribusiness culture in the country.¹⁷

In philanthropy and social investment, too, the new generation of Egyptians have established a large number of NGOs working with Egypt's poor and needy, including the provision of educational and vocational assistance. Among them are independent

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

groups such as Al-Mahrousa and The American University in Cairo's Philanthropy Centre. Social work and enterprise extended to general social and environmental problems, such as efforts of independent activists to raise awareness of climate change, solve old Cairo's severe rubbish problem and confront the problem of female genital mutilation in poor rural districts.

But young Egyptians' most important contribution today is not in cinema, literature, business, philanthropy or social work; it is in formulating their own definition of Egyptianism, their own definition of a twenty-first-century Egyptian project. The fragile channel of communication between the fading generation of the 1950s and 1960s and young Egyptians, and the overall weakening of 'brand Egypt' has encouraged some of the generations taking the stage to develop their own understanding of their society and heritage. Some talented young people, depressed by the devastating decline of Egyptian culture, values, attitudes and behaviour, leapt over the past fifty years (seeing only troubles and failures), and embraced Egypt's liberal experiment of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. The tolerance that had characterized that experiment; the refinement, the beauty, the sophistication and the civility of the Egyptian society at the time; the cosmopolitanism of Cairo and Alexandria; and the overall *joie de vivre* of the period, intoxicated those searchers for a new identity, a new understanding of their cultural inheritance.

These young talents sought a confluence between the appeal of the liberal experiment and the energy that their coming onto the stage of Egyptian society has unleashed. The 2000s saw a plethora of films, TV series and novels glorifying and extolling the liberal experiment, especially its tolerant values, and its relaxed *modus vivendi*. One of the most successful TV programmes on a youth-oriented satellite channel in Egypt in Ramadan 2010 (Egyptian television's annual high season) was *Kan Yama Kan* (roughly 'was

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

in the past') – a nostalgic show about Egyptian life and society in the 1930s and 1940s. The infatuation with the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s extended to a large number of new and exclusive restaurants in Cairo and Alexandria where the decor is 'chic 30s', the waiters wear the old fez (*tarbouche*) and the menus offer 'classic Egyptian cuisine'. Those young Egyptians, almost all hailing from Egypt's liberal capitalist camp, have been trying to summon a charming bygone past and superimpose it over the present they resent.

Some young Islamists, too, have responded to the failure of their movement by seeking inspiration (or evasion) in history: the early Islamic society of Medina, the Abbasid era in Baghdad, the Ummayyad era in Andalusia, Saladin's victories or the great Mamelukes. A multitude of 'Islamic preachers' burst out on Islamist screens, programmes and chatrooms promoting 'our glorious history', 'noble values', 'the mercy and compassion of Islam' and 'the purity of earlier Islamic societies'. The return to past glories complemented the Islamic movement's missionary zeal in the present and provided it with an emotional counterpart to liberal nostalgia.

The jump to the past also stemmed from the historical and contextual vacuum from which Egyptian society suffers. The country witnessed a continuous process of repudiating the past and discrediting its leaders. Al-Wafd sidelined all of Saad Zaghloul's (and later Mustafa Al-Nahas's) challengers inside (and outside) the party – from Adly Yakan Pasha in the 1920s to Makram Ebeid Pasha in the 1940s. Nasser tarnished the 'bygone era' and silenced all of its men. Sadat sullied the entire Nasserite project and Nasser himself, throughout the second half of the 1970s, became an open target for state media. The Islamic movement shunned all of Egypt's leaders, and its militant side portrayed many of them as infidels. And recently the liberal

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

capitalist elite disassociated itself from all of what has come before it. Even in culture, the same trend took place: Taha Hussein, Al-Akkad, Tawfik Al-Hakeem, Naguib Mahfouz, Yousef Idris, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal and others all were on the receiving end of serious smearing campaigns.

That discrediting of the past, the rapid transformations of the society over the past six decades and the major differences between the various ideologies and *projects* of the successive eras has left the people, especially the young, without national givens. Modern Egypt lacks consensus on any notion, project or person in its recent history. Its longest conflict in the past seventy years (the four wars against Israel) today seems meaningless in the context of an Egypt that is a pillar of the Pax Americana in the Middle East. The foundations of its revolution (social equality and the Arab nationalist identity) are remnants of the past, divorced from today's realities. Its hero (Nasser) is either adored or vilified without an objective assessment of his role in the country's history. Even its two traditional religions today seem entangled in a tense relationship. The young lack not only a role model or a continuous national project to which they belong, but also a nationally accepted narrative of their past.

Many observers have seen these appeals to the past in the context of the overarching political struggle in Egypt between the regime's liberal capitalists and the Islamic movement: the creative figures of cinema, music and literature were extolling liberalism's values, imposing the remnants of Egypt's liberal experiment on the country; the philanthropists were acting out of religious consciousness; the private-equity professionals, the investment bankers and the myriad businessmen (and women) were associates and junior partners of the regime, while thousands of small and medium-sized businesses were part of the economic infrastructure of the Islamic movement in the country.

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

But that view failed to recognise that the young's endeavours were truly independent from the liberal capitalists and the Islamists; they represented the need of millions of young Egyptians to rise above their unfortunate situation (including the struggle between the regime and the Islamic movement) and to cling to something they could be proud of, some frame of reference, a skeleton of an identity.

The more compelling criticism of today's efforts and contributions, then, is that most of them are indeed mere skeletons. The young liberals took from Egypt's liberal experiment its charming and polished facade; but they lacked the depth (or the interest) to delve into the period's realities. They ignored the plight of foreign occupation, the central political reality of Egypt's 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. They overlooked the liberal experiment's pivotal intellectual struggle between the Mediterranean-ists who wanted to place Egypt in Europe and the eastern-ists. They discounted the dramatic socio-economic gap that marked Egyptian society then (despite the similarities with today's situation). And though their packaging was attractive (such as the high production values of the TV series and films that espoused the liberal experiment), they lacked determination and intellectual courage. They invoked the facades of liberalism; but they did not go further and push for a confrontation with Salafism and its clinging to the past (as outstanding liberal intellectuals such as Taha Hussein had done at the height of the liberal experiment).

The young Islamists did not fare better. Their selection of the images of the purity of Prophet Mohamed's early Islamic society and the glorious victories of the Abbasids, Saladin and the Mamelukes was an example of excessive historical subjectivity that censored history and consciously (or ignorantly) overlooked the almost continuous embarrassing episodes of blood-letting and internal struggles. And as was the case with the liberals, the

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

young Islamists excelled in packaging: young, soft-spoken, well-dressed, articulate preachers. But they lacked the solidity, audacity and scholarly vigour of Islamic thinkers such as Mohamed Abdou, Al-Akkad or even recently Seleem Al-Awaa or Gamal Al-Banna, who, courageously, delved into the realities of Islamic history and experimented with new interpretations.

There were also initiatives by young Nasserites and Arab nationalists (especially in journalism and literature) advocating a revival of Egypt's traditional role in the region. They campaigned for 'saving Gaza', made films honouring the 'martyrs of the Arab nation' and even advocated minor programmes of 'pan-Arab unity'; but there wasn't the depth and sturdiness of Nasser or the brilliance and composure of Heikal. Their message demonstrated more noise and passion than a profound understanding of the Egyptian project.

The youths' efforts were also internally focused. Their 'appeals to the past' were divorced from any creativity in terms of looking at the country's national security or strategic positioning. Neither the liberals nor the Islamists who sought solace in earlier glamour and glory put forward serious views regarding Egypt's approach to international relations. That was partly the result of the young people's exclusion from politics and the tenuous link between their creativity and enterprise and the experience of the older generation now leaving the scene. But it was also the result of languor and indolence. The loudest voices in the young liberals camp repeatedly idolized 'liberal, Mediterranean Egypt' but failed to define what kind of relationship Mediterranean Egypt should have with the United States in light of the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, how Egypt should position itself in (or with regard to) the Arab world and what should be the dynamics governing the relationship with Israel, given the deteriorating situation in the Palestinian territories. The young

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

Islamists gracefully avoided any discussion of how ‘a return to our glorious Islamic past’ would affect the country’s foreign policy, the peace treaty with Israel or, indeed, the implications of their Islamic calling on Egypt’s Arab or Mediterranean heritage.

Young Egyptians’ different enterprises are only a few years old, and have a long way to go. Most of today’s efforts actually reflect the consequences of the weak links between the generations, the extremely poor educational system, the denying of political participation for decades, the oppressing conservatism, the retreat of liberalism and exposure to the West and the deteriorating Egyptian culture of the past few decades. And in their attempts to make sense of their heritage, they have faced a far harder task than many of their predecessors, so consuming of the past have Egypt’s recent decades been. It would be unfair to compare young Egyptians’ endeavours with Egypt’s liberal experiment and/or with Nasserite Arab nationalism – as some observers have done. The first, as discussed in Chapter 1, was the outcome of more than half a century of a comprehensive cultural renaissance, determined efforts at development and progress and a political and social movement inspired by ‘catching up with Europe’. Arab nationalism, despite the strong momentum that Nasser personally represented, followed more than thirty years of toying with Arabism and easternism.

This generation is animated by a passion to escape the failure it feels it has inherited. Swaths of young Egyptians, across many sectors (in business, academia, entertainment, social development and the arts), dismiss their recent past and present as utter failures. The economic malfunctioning that has kept more than 40 per cent of the population under the international line of poverty; the disappointments in foreign policy and the country’s

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

international standing; the breakdown in the social contract in the country; and the feeling of an overarching defeat and almost total collapse, has driven the young (many of whom have had far better education and exposure to the wider world than their parents) to deem the previous generations' experience bankrupt, with nothing to offer or learn from.

There is a glaring disconnection between the generations, and a rejection of the old by the young. This rejection is even noticeable in fiction for adolescents. Whereas in the 1980s, the most successful series of this genre was *Ragol Al-Mustabeel* (an Egyptianized James Bond, who is part of the state's General Intelligence Agency), the 2000s witnessed the emergence of the rebel hero who snubs the state's system and society's norms. To a large extent, the rise of the new stars of business, finance, academia, entertainment and journalism has been a displacement of old norms, leaders and modus operandi, rather than a continuation and building upon of existing structures. In the public sector, entire management teams (some of them with decent track records) have been forced into retirement and replaced by young managers drawn from the private sector. State-owned banks witnessed a complete makeover with MBA graduates with stints in investment banks in London and New York replacing a generation of older bureaucrats. In government, the new 2004 administration was a breakaway from previous ways of working and thinking. Even in culture (especially in literature and cinema, two of the very few areas in which recent Egyptian heritage is commendable), Egypt's bestselling books and films in the last few years have been vastly different in terms of style, themes and even language from traditional Egyptian novels and films.

Turning to history to borrow from earlier experiences and the dismissal of the recent past as utter failure reflects a presumption

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

that the dynamism of young Egyptians is inherently superior to that of their predecessors (by virtue of better education and exposure, and because of the widespread disregard for recent history and heritage). A prevailing line of thinking is that these new efforts could pull this 'failing society' out of its current situation and usher in a new promising future; that the new momentum in business, academia, entertainment, social development and the arts will create economic, financial and cultural centres of excellence in Egypt (in the midst of the poor masses) which will trigger positive ripple effects throughout the economy and society, and which in time will lead the country towards development and progress.

It will be a long and tough path. Almost all the contributions and initiatives mentioned above – in business, philanthropy and culture – are top-down, remain divorced from major public influence and together lack the ability to coalesce into a national project. They do not touch the vast majority of young Egyptians, whose main concerns are surviving in daily life, finding work and social opportunities and acquiring skills. Even geographically, most of those initiatives are concentrated in Cairo and Alexandria and some areas in the Delta, detached from the majority of the country's youths – for example, far away from Al-Saeed or Al-Nuba.¹⁸ The successful business groups have become the country's main employers. The new cultural and artistic wave has found in Egyptian youths its largest market and fan base. And even the many philanthropic groups have worked with thousands of deprived young Egyptians in poor neighbourhoods. Yet the real involvement of the millions of young Egyptians remains miniscule. The vast majority of the 45 million Egyptians under thirty-five years of age are concerned with survival, trapped in circles of economic suppression and political repression; new business or work opportunities are beyond not only their

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

capacities and acquired skills, but also their understanding; social work, activism and concern for overall social challenges are luxuries to be dismissed with smiles of scorn and bitterness; and entertainment and culture are taken in small doses when the grind of daily life permits.¹⁹

This severance between society's most important dynamics (which are, invariably, driven by bright young Egyptians) and the majority of the population is society's greatest loss. Millions are prevented by their crippling circumstances from participating in the most important (and promising) changes their society is undergoing. Society is thus denied their contribution. The Arab Human Development Report of 2009 concluded that the young are insecure in 'almost all living aspects'; their lives render them 'hardly free' to make their own decisions; their socio-political environments disfavour any meaningful social participation, whether political or economic; and the abuse of their rights drives them to reject not only the governing regime, but the entire society in which they feel imprisoned and humiliated.²⁰

There are nonetheless some positive trends. For the first time since the 1950s, the private sector in Egypt now employs more Egyptians than the public sector. This significant shift coincides with the regime's subtle but consistent lifting of the social safety net that Egyptians have enjoyed since the 1960s. This means that the prices of staple foodstuffs are increasing (which provoked serious demonstrations and riots in early 2008); healthcare is effectively becoming privatized; the government's guarantee to create job opportunities for new graduates is all but null and void; and the dominant operating mode of the entire economy is unmistakably capitalist. Many observers highlight the corruption and vast income differentials that are among the by-products of these changes. As important, however, is the emergence of a new and broad-based class of engaged economic agents who partici-

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

pate in and have stakes in the country's economic system. These businesspeople (owners and shareholders, as well as managers and employees) are economically independent of the government's and the public sector's schemes, and this encourages a much more assertive and outspoken attitude towards the elements holding the country back. It is notable, for example, that new and relatively insignificant associations of small- and medium-sized business entities are actively involved in drafting laws, in the tradition of white papers pursued by Western governments. Also of significance is that the government's new universal tax system is based on participatory contribution, whereby industry and special-interest groups have a say in various details and schemes.

The effects of that stakeholder mentality are mounting. It is common for observers to hail new media and the Internet, satellite TV channels and greater openness to the outside world as central to the wave of political activism that Egypt has witnessed since 2003–4 (involving active professional syndicates, flourishing universities and a multitude of bloggers). All true, but arguably more fundamental is the factor of self-assurance that comes from being economically independent. The spreading realization among many young Egyptians (in the higher as well as lower socio-economic segments) that they will never work for the government or the public sector – because these are no longer the main providers in Egyptian society – has been the trigger of the new activism. That trend is now irreversible – and is gaining momentum. One of the most important dynamics in Egypt today is how (no longer if) the private sector and its agents will transform their economic power into political power.

Another major trend among young Egyptians concerns the areas where the new Egyptian capitalism meets young people's creativity and thirst for change. For example, three investment funds were launched in 2009 that focus solely on the most

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

deprived areas in Al-Saeed; all are managed by thirty-something young Egyptians who have returned to the country from New York and London. The information-technology sector in Egypt is also witnessing a wave of entrepreneurialism, capital investment and exposure to advanced technologies. The same trend is taking place in the tourism, food and beverage, transportation, real-estate and consumables sectors. There is a fusion here of personal incentive and social improvement that is a potential source of development and progress.

The country is also experiencing a revival in the role of (and respect for) civil society. Long ignored and demonized during the decades of the rise of Islamism, civil society is regaining some of its lost ground. While the Islamic movement's (and the Church's) social infrastructures continue to be the country's most widespread and effective social networks, private groups are active today in trying to supplement the government's ailing public social services. The rise of private universities, businessmen associations, chambers of commerce, consumer protection groups and the multitude of independent press and TV channels that Egypt has seen in the 2000s are part of the trend. All are assertive of Egyptianism (as opposed to Islamism or Christianity) in various social aspects and endeavours. For example, the country's most generous and sought-after scholarships today are offered by three private, independent trusts, rather than the government or a religious body; the professional syndicates and the Judges' Club front today's wave of political activism; the four independent Egyptian newspapers with the highest circulation (especially among young Egyptians) are determinedly secular. For example, *Al-Dostour*, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, *Sout Al-Ummah* and *Al-Shorouk* are able to combine a firmly secular line with intelligent and invigorating coverage of Islamic (and Christian) topics of interest.

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

Even Islamism is changing. There is a recurring tendency among analysts to simplify political Islamism by reducing it to the Muslim Brotherhood; but this is not (as is often stated) the most important or pervasive Islamic force in the country. This description more accurately defines the Salafist movements (discussed in Chapters 1 and 3). Salafists, who regard early pious Muslims and their communities as exemplary models, command major followings among young Egyptians. They are not politically active and have a relatively blank record: no history of violence, no organizational structure, no manifestos and no obvious political ambitions, and that is why they are tolerated (and sometimes encouraged) by the regime; that is also why they do not feature in news bulletins or reports on the country. Their influence, however, is many times more than that of organized political Islam. Their presence has traditionally been much more diverse than political or militant groups.

Political and militant Islam, as a result of its organizational structures, has grown through geographic expansion. In the case of militant Islamism, for example, the growth was from Al-Saeed (where the police's presence in the mid- and late 1970s was relatively light) to Cairo and Alexandria. Salafist groups, however, because they mostly lack organizational structures, expand haphazardly and rapidly. Salafist thinking, which has been proliferating in Egypt for more than three decades, is based on a religious view of life and a strict and highly conservative social code, and inherently advances an Islamist foreign policy. Unlike political Islamism, which has clear objectives, Salafism is an abstract current that is flexible enough to accommodate and absorb different ambitions and orientations. The accumulating influence of this significant Salafist sway on Egyptian society is making many young Egyptians more anti-secular, anti-liberal and anti-Western.

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

Yet, at the other end of the social spectrum, millions of young Egyptians, Egypt's first digital generation, are highly westernized; there are very liberal sparks in music, films and literature, and in attitudes, styles of living and tastes. But the most interesting changes are taking place in some of Cairo's and Alexandria's poorest neighbourhoods and deep in Saeedi villages. Millions of youths from disadvantaged backgrounds are, for the first time, exposed to the world in ways that expand aspirations and ambitions. Though more than 50 per cent of them are still without access to modern schools and hospitals, let alone a personal computer, the openness to the world makes them realize that there is much more to life than the immediate circumstances they have been born into. One result is that demand for English-language, personal-computing, secretarial and business-basics courses is mushrooming in the unlikeliest of places in Egypt. For example, the British Council in Egypt is the largest of its operations worldwide. Professional apprenticeships are also growing. Behind the wild eyes, dusty faces and crowds that many in the West associate with conservatism, anger and potential menace, there are millions, in the midst of devastating conditions, who are admirably striving for better futures.

These more positive trends in today's Egypt interact with the contributions in business, finance, culture, social investment and philanthropy. The results remain unclear. There is a chance that the new dynamism that Egyptian society is currently experiencing, after the turbulent times of the past sixty years, will bring about development and progress phases that Egyptian society has not yet undergone. In the same way that the Great Depression, the two world wars and a period of dynamism and youth rebellion (in the late 1960s) steered Western societies towards social maturity, the dominance of a solid and colossal middle class, a national focus on quality of living, a respect for

YOUNG EGYPTIANS

individualism and the enshrining of democracy, the current interactions in Egypt could be that last developmental phase – after the Nasserite expansion, *al-infita*'s shockwaves, militant Islamism and sectarianism and religious conservatism – enabling Egyptian society to reach the same final destinations. The new developments could evolve to become the next phase of progress that Egypt was denied by the liberal experiment's abrupt end sixty years ago. The wager would be on the expansion and growth of an increasingly secure and economically independent (from the state) middle class that would recognize its rights and have the sophistication and means to demand them, and the maturity (and stake in the country) to achieve these rights through peaceful changes.

But the same interactions and dynamics could prove to be false promises. They might remain sparks and green shoots in the midst of a dismal present. The independent and increasingly assertive private sector could recoil from enhancing its role and confronting Egypt's various socio-economic problems; fortify itself in free zones, export-driven industries and sectors; and link its revenues and cash flows to international, mobile circles, rather than commit them to its home market. The daring young creative types could fail to grow into a serious social force able to effect change in their society, and remain confined to entertainment, content with ballooning box offices. Social workers, philanthropists and the hundreds of engaged activist groups could also remain marginal to society's gruelling realities, satisfied with disparate projects with limited, localized results. Adam Smith's invisible hand could stop working, and society could plunge further into despair. The detachment of the majority of young Egyptians, amid crushing living conditions and the absence of a national project to ignite energy and momentum, could instead – at a moment at which the regime fails to grab

EGYPT ON THE BRINK

hold of the country – rouse a tornado of turmoil in which anger and despair trump hope.

Today, Egypt resembles the agonized Egyptian at the beginning of Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Autumn Quail*, seemingly 'standing in the middle of nowhere and everywhere'.²¹ The direction in which young Egyptians will drive their society is yet to emerge.

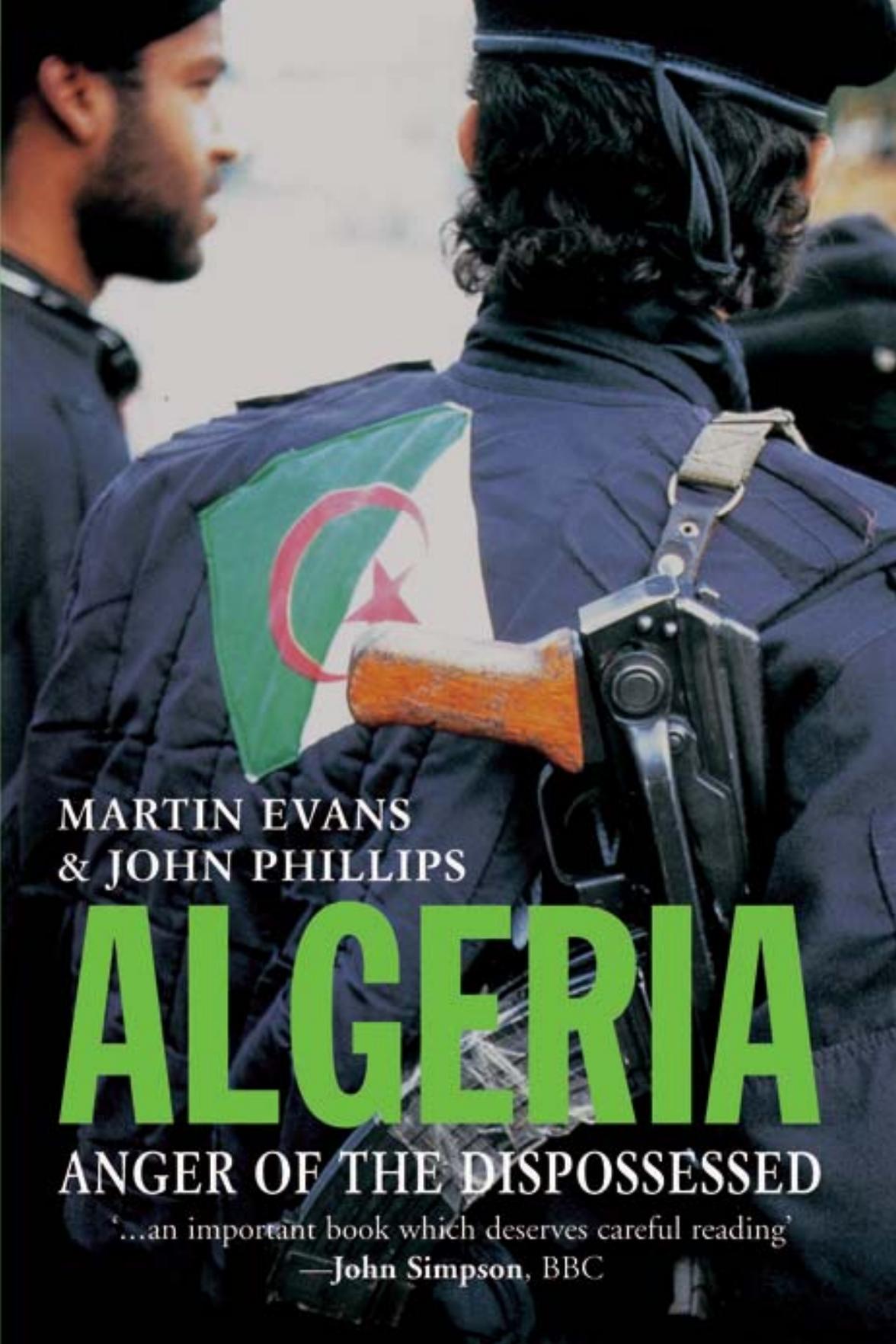
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Chapter 7: Young Egyptians

1. For example, see Michelle Dunne's study, 'A Post-Pharaonic Egypt', *American Interest*, September–October 2008, Aladdin Elaasar's 'Is Egypt Stable?', *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2009, in addition to various reports by the International Crisis Group, the *Economist* newspaper, Care International, the UN Development Programme and others.
2. Sociologist Samir Hanna quoted in *Al-Abram Weekly*, 3 December 2008.
3. A respondent in a survey by the same publication.
4. See the Egyptian Information and Decision Support Centre's June 2009 report on unemployment in Egypt.
5. According to a study by the Arab Labour Organization, at least 50 per cent of students who take up postgraduate studies in Europe or the US do not return to live in Egypt.
6. Max Rodenbeck's *Cairo: The City Victorious* (Picador, 1998) is a tour de force of old Cairo's history and geography, the attitudes and behaviours of its people and the 'feel' and character of the city.
7. Gamal Al-Ghitanni, *Regaining Al-Musafir Khana* (in Arabic, Dar Al-Shorouk, Cairo, 2007).
8. Most Egyptian cemeteries are different in design and construction from Western ones. Since ancient Egyptians believed that the deceased's family would 'accompany' him in the first forty days after his soul's death (or the first forty days of his voyage into the other world), Egyptians built their burial sites in multiple rooms that could sustain living and even social interaction. John Foster's *Ancient Egyptian Literature: An Anthology* (Texas University Press, 2001) shows how Egyptians, even in their poems, commemorated death and dealt with it as a phase within a long journey.
9. The work of the Swiss painter and photographer Margo Veillon, who spent years travelling around the Egyptian countryside, is a detailed and visual reflection of the Egyptian peasants' relationship with their land.
10. Business Monitor's Q2 2009 Report on the Egyptian economy has a detailed analysis of the Egyptian demographic pyramid.
11. See the US State University Directory on the Egyptian Education System, Business Monitor International's 2009 report on Egypt's infrastructure, Karima Korayem's *The Research Environment in Egypt* (Research for Development in the Middle East and North Africa at the International Development Research Centre, 2000), the UN Arab Human Development Report 2005, and a number of lectures by Dr Ahmed Zewail, the winner of the 1999 Nobel Prize in Chemistry.
12. *Leilat Al-Baby Doll*, a 2007 movie produced by GoodNews4U, cost more than US\$8 million, a staggering budget by Egyptian cinema standards.
13. Idris (1927–91) is Egypt's most prominent short-story writer (his most famous collections include *The Cheapest Nights*, *A House of Flesh* and *I am the Sultan of the Law of Existence*). He is also an innovative playwright and satirist with experimentations such as *Al-Farafeer* (a sensational theatrical success in the 1960s). According to the Cultural Bulletin of Egypt's State Information Service, his work has been the subject of about ninety-five PhD theses in and outside Egypt.
14. Al-Aswany came to prominence through his highly successful novel *The Yacoubian Building* (published in Cairo by Merit Publishing in 2002; the English-language translation, by Humphrey Davies, was published by The American

NOTES

- University in Cairo Press in 2004). *The Yacoubian Building* has been translated into twenty-three languages.
15. For example, Khaled Al-Khamissi's *Taxi* (translated into English as *Taxi: Cabbie Talk*, Aflame Books, 2008) and Osama Ghareeb's *Egypt is not My Mother, but My Stepmom* (Dar Al-Shorouk, 2008).
 16. Al-Koshary is the quintessential Cairene dish (a mixture of pasta, rice and lentil in a hot tomato and garlic sauce).
 17. Dr Raouf Abbas Hamed, ex-chair of the History Department at Cairo University, wrote extensively on the socio-economic implications of the country's agricultural heritage.
 18. The detachment of Al-Saeed was also the result of rising tribal solidarity during the 1980s and 1990s. Diane Singerman and Paul Amar state that rising Saeedi solidarity was also influenced by their experience of migration to the Gulf, where tribal values shape society. See the introduction of *Cairo Cosmopolitan*.
 19. The difficulty of life in Egypt for ordinary individuals sometimes touches on the bizarre and depressing. In its September 2009 issue, *Egypt Today* ran a reportage on Al-Barada, a village in Al-Qalyoubia (one of the nearest governorates to Cairo). The sole source of drinkable water for the village's 30,000 inhabitants has, for ten years, been neighbouring villages or a water tanker that comes once a day to the village. After the government inaugurated a new project to supply the village with drinkable water, 'we found the water yellow as mango juice, and it smelled awful', one villager said. Soon the 'drinkable' tap water spread typhoid across the village's families. It later transpired that the predicament in Al-Barada was a common problem across other villages and towns. Typhoid rates, which are universally estimated to be a total of around 21 million cases, spread in a number of Egyptian governorates at the rate of 59 cases for every 100,000 people, a frightening ratio.
 20. The report offers a lengthy and comprehensive review of how Arab regimes in general, not only in Egypt, have developed into threats to the ordinary Arab, rather than the guardians of his/her rights, independence and dignity. The discussion on the impacts of the obsession with security among Arab regimes is particularly illuminating, albeit chilling.
 21. Mary Anne Weaver used a similar analogy in *A Portrait of Egypt: A Journey through the World of Militant Islam* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000).



MARTIN EVANS
& JOHN PHILLIPS

ALGERIA

ANGER OF THE DISPOSSESSED

'...an important book which deserves careful reading'

—John Simpson, BBC

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

IN HIS BOOK *Taliban* Ahmed Rashid explains how by the mid-1990s Afghanistan had become a pawn in the new 'Great Game'.¹ Evoking the oldstyle imperialist rivalry between the British and Russian empires in the later nineteenth century, Rashid's term is an apt description for the new competition between Western companies, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United States as they vied for the control of new oilfields and transit routes for oil pipelines. So, for Rashid the crux of the unfolding Afghan crisis was imperialism and the fight for scarce resources necessary to sustain the West. This was why the Clinton administration initially saw the Taliban in a positive light in 1996; no matter how repressive, in the final analysis the Taliban were securing law and order in an area vital for America's long-term economic interests.

Algeria too must be understood as part of this new 'Great Game'. As the IMF and World Bank opened up Algeria to the world markets there was a scramble for oil, gas and influence. With the deregulation of the all-important energy sector, Western companies and the European Union wooed the regime, signing a series of lucrative contracts to secure a stake in the country's precious resources. Such moves, paving the way for outside control, would have been anathema under Boumediène in the 1960s and 1970s, when Algeria was resolutely anti-imperialist. Striving for economic

ALGERIA

independence had always been a badge of honour but by the mid-1990s the Algerian regime, desperate for international credit to keep afloat, had no choice but to ingratiate itself with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. To reassure would-be investors, fearful about the military situation, the regime created a special exclusion zone around the oil and gas fields in the south. Thus, on 23 December 1995 British Petroleum finalized a contract worth \$3 billion giving it the right to exploit gas deposits in Aïn-Salah in the Sahara for the next thirty years. Total completed a similar deal amounting to \$1.5 billion one month later and on 15 February 1996 the American firm Arco signed a contract for a joint venture to drill in Rhourd El-Baguel oilfield. In November 1996 a pipeline supplying gas to the EU was opened.

These contracts undoubtedly bolstered the regime at its most perilous point in the war against Islamist insurgents. Tied into Algeria through huge investments, these companies and the EU now had a clear interest in making sure that the regime did not go under. At the same time the deals highlighted the fact that the country's natural resources were a curse as well as a blessing. In theory they made Algeria a rich country but in practice the shadowy economic mafia siphoned off the money through a complex network of private monopolies and import-export companies, even gobbling up much of the 1994 debt rescheduling.² Lining their pockets thus, they had no interest in reinvesting this wealth in the population and the result was an investmentstarved economy plagued by corruption and bad governance; a state of affairs exacerbated by the Western powers, who were chiefly interested in securing cheap oil and gas resources.

If Algeria was part of the 'Great Game', the country was also a nodal point in the growing 'war' against international Islamist terrorism. Still reeling from the 1995 and 1996 bombings in Port Royal and St Michel in Paris, the French authorities were petrified by the threat of terrorism in the run-up to the World Cup in France in summer 1998. French citizens of Algerian origin were put under

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

intense scrutiny. Visits to their parents' homeland were seen as potentially sinister. The French secret services were particularly concerned by transnational Islamist networks linked to Abu Hamza and Omar Abu Omar, the Jordanian Palestinian better known as Abu Qutada, both of whom were based at the Finsbury Park mosque in north London and issued a regular flow of fatwas to GIA groups operating in France and Algeria, drawing upon a deluge of references from the Qur'an and Salafist theologians to justify all manner of violence, including the killing of women and children. In the eyes of the French, the British government had consistently underestimated the threat posed by this nerve centre of Islamism, and French secret service agents were despatched to London to track the two clerics' every move and infiltrate the Finsbury mosque.³

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was also monitoring the Algerian situation closely by the late 1990s. As far back as 1985 the CIA had opened a station in Algiers, producing a regular flow of intelligence, but this operation intensified in the wake of the failed attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 26 February 1993.⁴ Then a bomb, composed of 1,200 lbs of explosives, several heavy tanks of hydrogen and two 20-foot fuses and hidden in a van parked beneath the twin towers, had exploded shortly after midday, killing six people and injuring more than a thousand. The attack could have been much worse – one of the ringleaders, the Pakistani militant Ramzi AhmedYousef, claimed later that he aimed to kill 250,000 people by toppling one tower into another – and in response the CIA's Counter-Terrorist Center established a seven-day, twenty-four-hour taskforce to collect intelligence on terrorism. One branch tracked extremism in the Sunni world, concentrating on the unfolding situation in Algeria. CIA analysts, in conjunction with station chiefs in Algiers, Cairo and Tunis, studied the Algerian insurgency, deciphering a pattern of international cooperation between Islamist radicals. They were worried by the flow of Saudi Arabian money into these groups, the willingness of Britain, France

ALGERIA

and Germany to grant asylum to exiled leaders, and the movement of weapons from Sudan to Algeria. And they were alarmed by an upsurge of violence connected to Arab veterans of the Afghan jihad, among whom one name began to loom large: Osama bin Laden, the Saudi millionaire, who was involved in financing these groups.

Drawing up a balance sheet, the CIA Counter-Terrorist Center sought to assess American interests and responsibilities in North Africa.⁵ Starting with the assumption that this area was too important strategically to be left to France, CIA chiefs asked a series of related questions: what was the relationship between Algeria and terrorists who might threaten America? What policy should it adopt towards Algerian Islamists? Should it regard all Islamists as fundamentally anti-Western? Was the Algerian government deliberately inflating the threat in order to win American support?

Initially the United States had a foot in both camps. Leading FIS activists, notably Anwar Haddam, were allowed to live in America and had links with the corridors of power in Washington. The Clinton administration had mixed feelings about the Algerian regime, worried by their reluctance to let human rights organizations into the country as well as the news of their growing development of nuclear power.⁶ But the more the nineties went on the more the Algerian government was perceived as an ever more important ally in the campaign against Islamic terrorism; a vital source of intelligence, even if this information was tainted by torture. President Zeroual, now seen as 'our man in Algiers', was repeatedly supported in his internal power struggles by the American ambassador Ronald Neumann, and Washington sought to expand military cooperation with Algeria through a series of high-profile visits and joint manoeuvres. In 1998 Admiral Thomas Lopez, then commander of US Naval Forces Europe, headed an official delegation to Algiers, and the destroyer USS Mitscher participated in an Algerian navy search and rescue exercise. The United States also doubled its International Military Education and Training programme to Algeria that year. These

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

links were strengthened still further when US Defence Secretary William Cohen announced in February 1999 that America was going to deepen military cooperation and in May there were joint exercises with the US 6th Fleet, thereby making Algeria America's most important strategic partner in North Africa after Egypt and its long-standing ally Morocco.

This muscular American presence undoubtedly alarmed Paris. The Maghreb is France's back yard and the sight of the American military in Algiers fed into insecurities about grandeur and the French place in the world. The Algerian authorities, in turn, knew how closely French antennae were tuned to the threat of Anglo-Saxon encroachment. Exploiting this rivalry with great skill, they played one power off against the other, locking both into supporting the regime. Thus, any American visit would invariably be followed by the spectacle of a French official or military man scuttling off to Algiers, desperate to provide a counter-weight to US influence.⁷

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the Franco-American duel provided the Algerian leadership with a telling insight into Western calculations about international relations. For all their fine words about ethics and human rights, in an increasingly unpredictable post-Cold War world French, American and British priorities would be determined by two factors: the need for cheap resources and the growing war on terror.

* * *

In the wake of Zeroual's departure presidential elections were set for February 1999. These were then quickly put back to 15 April 1999 as Algeria became embroiled in rumours about who was and who was not putting themselves forward. Backstage there were intense discussions amongst the army barons about who had the capacity to lift the country out of its impasse. Suddenly one name was on everybody's lips: Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Boumediène's foreign minister.

ALGERIA

With his short stature and scraped-over hair, Bouteflika, born in 1937, was the nearly man of Algerian politics. He had nearly succeeded Boumediène as president in 1979. He had also nearly taken over in 1994, allegedly turning the post down because he was not promised enough independence. Politically speaking he had a reputation as a canny operator, emerging during the war of liberation as a leading member of Boumediène's Oujda clan before his long service at the United Nations.⁸ Well versed in the intricacies of international diplomacy, he was seen as a pro-Western liberal who had always been lukewarm about socialism. In 1981 Bouteflika had gone into self-imposed exile to escape corruption charges that were later dropped. His wilderness years had come to an end when he returned to Algeria in 1987, adding his signature to a letter of protest by eighteen historic Algerian figures condemning the brutality of army troops during October 1988.⁹

This curriculum vitae played a vital role in Bouteflika's political appeal. Not implicated in the violence of the 1990s, he was seen by many as a clean pair of hands who, even if he had a reputation as a liberal modernizer, was a throwback to the halcyon days of Boumediène. Moreover, unlike Zeroual, who had always been stiff and ill at ease on the international stage, Bouteflika was a consummate actor. A good speaker in front of the cameras, he projected determination, energy and apparent purpose. Above all he promised to end the violence and restore the Algerians' faith in themselves and their place in the world.

The impetus for Bouteflika's candidature came initially from General Larbi Belkheir who succeeded in winning round the other leading generals, including Smaïn Lamari, the head of counter-intelligence. Lamari was then crucial in winning the endorsement of the RND leadership, some of whom were initially sympathetic to Hamrouche, the former prime minister. Importantly too, Hamas came out in support of Bouteflika when their own leader, Mahfoud Nahnah, was excluded on a technicality, and leading members of

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

the RCD, including Khalida Messaoudi, also called on Algerians to back him despite their party's policy of a boycott.

Shortly after Zeroual's resignation in September 1998, Khaled Nezzar, supposedly retired but still an extremely influential figure, had set out to stymie any talk of Bouteflika for president.¹⁰ Recalling the way in which Bouteflika had backed out when confronted with the challenges of power in 1994, Nezzar implied that he was temperamentally unsuited for high office. But by January 1999 subtle pressure had been brought to bear on Nezzar and he fell into line. In an interview with *Le Matin* he completely retracted his comments, lavishing praise on Bouteflika as far and away the best candidate.¹¹

Such a ringing endorsement typified the bandwagon effect that surrounded Bouteflika. Committees of support sprang up in all the major towns, underlining his war of liberation credentials by constantly talking of him as '*al-moudjahid Si Abd el-Kader*'. Bouteflika played on this patriotic lineage himself, reminding Algerians that it was he who had campaigned for the return of Abd el-Kader's ashes in 1967 and that he had been one of the coffin bearers.

Although Bouteflika became de facto the official candidate, the regime tried to convince the public that the result was not a foregone conclusion.¹² Zeroual gave what he claimed were personal guarantees to the opposition parties that the elections would be honest and on this basis eleven candidates officially registered for the contest. Of these Hanoune, Ghozali and Boukrouh were excluded because they did not receive enough support from elected representatives, while Nahnah was disqualified because he had no documentation validating his participation in the war of liberation, thereby showing how the memory of the war of liberation continued to be mobilized for political purposes.¹³ This left Bouteflika to face Hocine Aït Ahmed, the aging FFS leader dubbed the 'eternal rebel', Mouloud Hamrouche, the reformist prime minister from 1989 to 1991 who was running as an independent, Abdallah Djaballah, the candidate

ALGERIA

of the new Islamist party, the Movement for National Reform, Mokdad Sifi, prime minister between 1993 and 1995 and backed by the anti-Bouteflika faction in the RND, and Youcef Khatib, a veteran from the internal resistance, imprisoned by Ben Bella, who had organized Zeroual's 1995 election campaign.

Arguably the biggest threat to Bouteflika's ambitions came from Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, the education minister in the 1960s who had pioneered Arabization and the closing down of French-language schools, many run by the Catholic Church. Presidential advisor in the 1970s, foreign minister from 1982 to 1988, like Bouteflika he had a long pedigree that was further enhanced by the fact that he was the son of the late Sheik Bachir Al-Ibrahimi, the leader of the Association of Algerian Ulema from 1940 to 1951. Also in favour of dialogue between the different sides, he was backed by many former FIS supporters and many saw him as a bridge between the army and the Islamists.

Despite the regime's assurances, the campaign was not equal from the start. Bouteflika was treated as president-elect by the television and pro-government press while the other candidates were ignored. On 14 April there was fraud during early polling organized for the security forces and the other six candidates withdrew in protest.¹⁴ Undeterred, the regime forged ahead with the election on the following day, whereupon the population registered its disgust through abstention. The turnout was embarrassingly low – an estimated 20 per cent overall and just 5 per cent in Kabylia, where Bouteflika's election posters had been regularly defaced – but state television dutifully announced over 60 per cent, awarding more than 70 per cent of the votes to the duly elected Bouteflika.

By any stretch of the imagination it was a mockery of democracy and the opposition candidates called for a campaign of mass protest. In Tizi-Ouzou, Oran and Algiers thousands flooded into the streets but the regime reacted with repression, banning all demonstrations. Other countries' reactions were carefully calibrated. Both France

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

and the United States declared themselves to be perturbed and disappointed by the election rigging but they stopped well short of an outright condemnation.

Unabashed at the manner of his victory, Bouteflika strode out for his first press conference full of bullish self-confidence. Exuding his characteristic brand of pugnacious charm, he brushed aside difficult questions about the domestic protests and the lukewarm foreign reaction. When a journalist asked who controlled him, he responded by asking who controlled the journalist. Once in office he went about piecing together a coalition composed of the pro-government parties FLN and RND along with Nahnah's party and part of Ennahda. In the meantime the opposition parties, predictably, degenerated into recrimination, each blaming the other for Bouteflika's victory. The new president was left to dominate the political field. In February 2000 Bouteflika replaced six major generals, a significant reshuffle that according to the press headlines demonstrated the president's ascendancy over the army. But on closer inspection things were less clear cut. Yes, Bouteflika had purged the Zeroual faction but this only confirmed the dominance of the former French officers, Lieutenant General Mohammed Lamari, chief of the general staff, Major General Mohammed Médiène, director of intelligence and security, and Major General Smaïn Lamari, director of counter-espionage and internal security, all of them the principal architects of the repression since 1992.¹⁵ These men remained the real power behind the throne, limiting Bouteflika's capacity for independent manoeuvre.

Away from the shadows Bouteflika projected an air of purposeful action, adopting a three-pronged strategy purportedly based on nationalism, honesty and economic recovery that aimed to reconnect with the lost generation of young Algerians. He remembered that under Boumediène Algeria had entered the global limelight, engendering an intangible but real sense of pride in its people. Bouteflika wanted to rekindle this self-belief. He also set

ALGERIA

out to be honest, acknowledging that the cancellation of elections in January 1992 was one of the origins of the conflict that had led to a hundred thousand deaths; a statement that caused consternation in some military circles.¹⁶ Finally, Bouteflika promised to revitalize the economy, in the hope that the continuing reforms initiated in partnership with Western institutions would at last bear dividends.

Drawing upon his time on the international stage under Boumediène, Bouteflika initially put enormous effort into foreign policy in an attempt to break out of the diplomatic isolation that had bedevilled the country since 1992 and persuade Algeria's principal Western partners to resume normal dealings. He cut a dash at the funeral of Morocco's King Hassan in July 1999, reportedly impressing President Clinton and enraging the Palestinian hardline Hamas movement by shaking hands publicly with prime minister Ehud Barak of Israel. Inevitably, however, France was Bouteflika's main target, and on 15 June 2000 he made a three-day full state visit to Paris. Greeted by a 760-foot red carpet when he touched down at Orly airport, Bouteflika was accorded a big welcome which included personal talks with President Chirac at the Elysée, a speech to the National Assembly, a state dinner and a reception at the Hôtel de Ville as well as lunch with prime minister Lionel Jospin. Thereafter, he met business leaders, members of the Algerian community and the head of the French Jewish community, Henri Hadjenberg.¹⁷ He also travelled to Verdun to pay homage to the 180,000 Algerian Muslims who had fought for France during the First World War. Throughout, Bouteflika stressed the theme of reconciliation and the need for a new era of Franco-Algerian relations and, although he complained that in concrete terms he left empty handed, he knew on another level that the visit was an enormous step forward. He had broken the international quarantine and Algeria was no longer a pariah state. Now that Paris had made a gesture other countries would follow suit and in July Bouteflika received the Spanish prime minister, José Aznar, the first European leader to visit Algeria since 1992.

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

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Bouteflika knew that his presidency hinged on his ability to deliver on his election promise to 'extinguish the fire'. On this front he had good reason to be optimistic. The AIS truce had endured and this, in combination with further army victories against the GIA, allowed the authorities to talk more credibly than before about the downward curve of violence. Those insurgents still fighting, officials claimed, were just a residual violence, the final pockets of resistance waiting to be mopped up by the security forces.

But if this assessment was largely true in the area west of Algiers towards the Moroccan border, where a rump of GIA groups had degenerated into smuggling, extortion and rape, it was less so in Kabylia and several regions of eastern Algeria. There the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), led by Hassan Hattab, the thirty-two-year-old former mechanic and paratrooper, had broken away from the other GIA groups and sought to solder together those groups who had rejected the AIS truce. Accusing the GIA of being infiltrated by the secret services and denigrating the massacre of civilians as murderous and counter-productive, the GSPC concentrated on attacking the security forces. By the end of 1999 its forces numbered between five hundred and one thousand and it had built up some measure of support as Hattab, already blamed by the authorities for the murder of the musician Lounès Matoub, assumed the status of the new public enemy number one.

In rejecting the most extreme forms of violence Hattab was playing a waiting game. He knew that the GSPC activists had to regroup and gather their strength, which in practical terms meant rebuilding the various networks, both within Algeria and without, that the GIA had developed between 1993 and 1998. It also meant approaching Osama bin Laden for logistical support. The Saudi millionaire, eager for access to ready-made networks in Europe and

ALGERIA

North America, was understood to be only too willing to oblige.¹⁸

In his book on al-Qaeda, the Observer journalist Jason Burke has pieced together the subterranean contacts between the GSPC and bin Laden, showing how, in exchange for money and weapons, the GSPC is thought to have supplied the Saudi with a steady stream of well-trained and well-disciplined militants.¹⁹ In June 2001 bin Laden sent his trusted Yemeni aide Emad Abdelwahid Ahmed Alwan, alias Abu Mohammed, to Algeria, via Ethiopia, the Sudan and Niger, as the latest in a series of initiatives that had been developing since around 1998. Since Alwan had helped Algerian Islamist militants set up camps in the Yemen in the early 1990s he was the perfect emissary and contacts of this nature explain why few of those subsequently arrested in Europe were simply 'al-Qaeda': the majority of them, at least until 2002, were linked to the GSPC or remnants of the GIA, because for bin Laden these men were vital in his gathering campaign against the West. They provided a bridgehead into France and beyond; nodal points in a labyrinthine world of mosques, meeting houses and military camps through which young Muslim men could be recruited and propelled in the direction of Pakistan for weapons training.

Ahmed Ressam, the son of a veteran of the war of liberation, left Algeria in 1992 to look for work in France as an illegal immigrant before getting into trouble with the French authorities and fleeing to Canada. In Montreal Ressam lived on the margins, surviving through petty theft and welfare payments. He had showed no Islamist sympathies when living in Algeria, but now, downtrodden and penniless in the West, he fell under the spell of two fellow countrymen, Fateh Kamel and Abderaouf Hannachi, both of whom frequented the Assuna Annabawiyah mosque in Montreal, well known for its Salafist brand of Islam, and both of whom were linked to the GIA. Fired up by their tales of the struggle in Algeria, as well as by Hannachi's stories of fighting in Afghanistan, Ressam was converted to their hardline brand of Islam and in March 1998

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

he travelled to Pakistan with a number of other Algerian recruits. At various camps there Ressay received training in sabotage, assassination and explosives, and during this time he and his fellow conspirators hatched the idea for a huge attack on America.²⁰ One year later Ressay was arrested at 6 p.m. on 14 December 1999 at the Canadian– American border, his car boot stuffed full of bomb-making equipment whose purpose was to kill hundreds of people at Los Angeles international airport on the eve of the new millennium.²¹

Ressay's biography recalled that of Khaled Kelkhal, the GIA activist assassinated by the French police in 1995. Like Kelkhal, Ressay was living a threadbare existence in the West and, just as for Kelkhal, this experience stimulated a volatile set of reactions. Conscious of being part of an ethnic minority, conscious too of his exclusion from the wealth of mainstream Canadian society, Ressay felt that he was being looked down upon and this nurtured a deep-seated rage. Rootless and alienated, Ressay was easily seduced by Kamel's argument that he had to see Algeria as just one piece in a grand Western plot to humiliate Islam. It was his sacred duty to strike back on behalf of oppressed Muslims everywhere, and violence of the most spectacular kind would enable him to lose his sense of powerlessness and ensure his own martyrdom.

Although Ressay was the most extreme example, many young Algerians, dispersed across Europe and North America either as immigrants or asylum seekers, gravitated towards extremist action. It would of course be wrong to suggest that every member of the Algerian diaspora was a potential terrorist. Nevertheless, the conditions of their lives abroad made a small minority highly susceptible to the lure of armed Islamism.²²

If some Algerians abroad were willing to take up the call for an international jihad against the West, back in Algeria there was a palpable decline in armed attacks, with 1,500 killed during 1999 as opposed to 3,000 in the previous year. But as violence receded the

ALGERIA

spotlight moved back on to the system itself. Ordinary Algerians were grateful for an end to chaos and lawlessness but they were also aware that fundamentally nothing had been resolved since October 1988. With the economy as bleak as ever they were still being humiliated by le pouvoir. Algeria had a terrible sameness and people began to suspect that whatever Bouteflika's promises the regime had a vested interest in Algeria keeping the violence going, albeit at more tolerable levels, in order to maintain the system.

Many Algerians were sceptical when Antar Zouabri, the GIA leader who according to the regime had been killed in 1997, made a sudden reappearance in 1999 as the alleged murderer of the former FIS leader Abdelkader Hachani, who was killed in broad daylight in central Algiers. Although Zouabri's group was blamed for the murder many saw this as simply too convenient, and suspected that the killers came from within the regime. This was yet another example of a figure of reconciliation, one who had advocated restraint in the face of the 1992 coup and was a possible figure of reconciliation, being assassinated just at the moment when he was poised to return to politics. Moreover, Hachani's death showed how terrorism fulfilled a vital function. Justifying the annual renewal of the state of emergency, it scared people into submission and stifled the emergence of mass political protest.

An experienced political realist, Bouteflika knew that he lacked electoral legitimacy. He wanted to cement his position by putting an end to the violence, and with this aim he put out discreet feelers to the AIS leaders, Madani Mezraq and Ahmed Benaïcha, in an effort to transform the ceasefire into a permanent settlement. The summer months of 1999 witnessed intense behind-the-scenes negotiations which culminated in a series of carefully choreographed responses and counter-responses as both sides, realizing that they had a mutual interest in formally ending the conflict, inched towards a settlement. First, on 1 June, Mezraq announced that he was ready to formalize the truce. On 4 June Bouteflika made a positive reply, signalling the

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

need to enshrine this process in a legal framework. Two days later Mezraq took up his offer, announcing the immediate cessation of all AIS military activity which in turn led the presidential office to issue a statement outlining the 'law on civil concord', duly rubber-stamped by a compliant National Assembly shortly after.

Many ordinary Algerians were genuinely encouraged by this flurry of activity. They looked hopefully to the leading FIS figures at home and abroad who, with the exception of the still imprisoned Belhadj, gave their blessing to the Mezraq-Bouteflika initiative. In contrast two of the former presidential candidates, Aït Ahmed and Taleb Ibrahimi, were critical. They voiced doubts about the civil concord's ability to deliver an enduring peace because the agreement ignored three key issues: the problem of the 'disappeared', the ending of the state of emergency and the future legal status of the FIS.

Sidestepping these issues Bouteflika pressed on regardless, pushing through a model of transition that was rigidly managed from above. The ordinary populace were not involved in any form of consultation; when the civil concord was put to them on 16 September they were simply asked to say reply 'for' or 'against' to the referendum question: 'Are you for or against the initiative of the President of the Republic to establish peace and civil concord?'

Such wording was deliberately vague because Bouteflika had no wish to be constrained. He wanted the referendum to give him a wide room for manoeuvre in his negotiations with the armed groups. Large numbers of Algerians were very aware of the ambiguity but, desperate for any glimmer of hope, they dutifully went to the polls, approving the civil concord with an apparent massive 98.6 per cent approval rate on a turnout of 85 per cent.

This result undoubtedly boosted Bouteflika's prestige. He had seemingly broken the cycle of violence and counter-violence and won himself muchneeded legitimacy as he was hailed as the peace maker: the man of consensus who, in offering an outstretched hand to all Algerians, had fulfilled his electoral promise to 'extinguish

ALGERIA

the fire'. Through him Algeria had taken a big step forward on the road to normalization and to the outside world the civil concord was proclaimed as the basis of a renewed, properly democratic politics.

But behind all the talk of peace and reconciliation Bouteflika had made a cold political calculation. He reasoned that if he was to stop the bloodshed there must be a pact of silence. All the protagonists had to agree to move on by forgetting their murderous divisions and focusing on the future. For this reason there was to be no talk of surrender. In coaxing the insurgents to down arms the regime had to eschew any triumphalism. The guerrillas must be allowed to return to society with their heads held high. They had to be given a tangible reward so that they could proclaim that the fighting had not been in vain and in concrete terms this meant immunity from prosecution, the right to hang on to their spoils of war extracted through racketeering, and the possibility of legalizing the FIS.²³

Within the civil concord, therefore, truth and justice had to be sacrificed. In the interests of realpolitik the pain and suffering of civilians was ignored. Amnesia was the order of the day as the civil concord in effect came to represent a common pardon for le pouvoir, the criminals and the armed groups. So, despite pledges to Amnesty International, nobody was brought to account for violence inflicted upon the population. The government displayed no concern for the families of the victims and the disappeared and this indifference provoked a growing sense of anger from below towards the whole transition process.

As these details became clearer in the subsequent months, the population saw the civil concord more and more as a cynical ploy, a mechanism by which perpetrators on all sides were allowed to escape justice. As Djamel Berrabah, president of the Coordination Committee for Truth and Justice, commented in an interview with L'Express on 13 April 2000: 'The ruling class has made a deal with the Islamists: "Be quiet, we know what you have done, you know what we have done – leave us in power and you will get your share."' '

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

In response to such criticisms Bouteflika was bluntly realistic. What was the alternative, he asked? How else could the violence be ended without jeopardizing the fragile peace?

In January 2000 the civil concord led to an amnesty whereby six thousand militants from the AIS, as well as groups led by Kertali and by Ali Benhadjar, were pardoned. Theoretically this amnesty was only extended to those not guilty of rape, murder or terrorism but in reality few questions were asked and there was little way of verifying the official figures. The whole process was deliberately opaque, partly, many suspected, because this allowed any double agents to disappear into obscurity. In the weeks following the amnesty hundreds of guerrillas, for the most part young men aged between eighteen and twenty, returned home. Many behaved provocatively. Believing that the amnesty had made them untouchable, they conducted themselves as conquerors, rarely expressing regret. Few gave up their 'Afghan'-type dress and beards, some bragged about their war adventures, enthralled adolescents with accounts of the mujahidin exploits. Mezraq paraded around in an armourplated Mercedes.

In early February Benhadjar and a hundred of his men quit their base in the countryside near Médéa in the 'Triangle of Death'. A former schoolmaster who had been elected as an FIS candidate in the cancelled parliamentary elections, Benhadjar had once been a diehard among diehards, arrested three times before going underground to join the GIA:

We took up arms to defend ourselves and our right to free speech. The people understand and they've pardoned us. And although the country has paid a heavy toll, our struggle was not in vain because we have recovered the right to free speech.²⁴

In 1995 he had left the GIA in protest at their bloodletting to form the Islamic League for Preaching and Jihad (Ligue Islamique de la

ALGERIA

Daâwa et du Djihad, LIDD), and the following year lost an eighteen-year-old son in a skirmish between the GIA and his breakaway band. He had abided by the AIS ceasefire declared in October 1997 and his group's armed activity was thereafter confined to fighting the GIA, chasing its gunmen out of the region.

Speaking at his home in Médéa in early 2000, Benhadjar showed few signs outwardly of changing. His hennaed beard was still long. But he spoke of reconciliation and reiterated his belief in promises made during negotiations with the AIS, especially one that the FIS would be allowed to re-form: 'We have shown them that we are committed to peace. It is their move now.'²⁵

With the likes of Benhadjar's LIDD dissolving themselves, the civil concord did lead to a further significant reduction in guerrilla activity during the first half of 2000. However, this decline stopped in late summer and autumn. Many former guerrillas were dismayed by the refusal to legalize the new political party Wafa (Fidelity) in November 2000 on the grounds that it was the ex-FIS in disguise.²⁶ For them this showed that the regime was not sincere about engaging with Islamist ideas and that the civil concord was nothing but a ruse to disarm the insurgency. Exploiting this discontent, Hassan Hattab did everything in his power to counteract the Bouteflika effect. Consequently there was a resurgence of violence during the final three months of the year with 250 killed in October alone.

* * *

A young Algerian asks his father about the colours of the Algerian flag. He knows that the green stands for Islam and the red for the blood of our glorious martyrs but what does the white stand for? 'The blank pages in our history,' replies the father.

(Algerian joke circa 1996)

How best to move on from a traumatic past is a challenge that has confronted a whole series of countries since the 1970s, from

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Spain, South Africa and Rwanda through to Argentina, Chile and Northern Ireland. Whatever the details of each case, all have been forced to grapple with a common set of questions. Should those with knowledge of killings be legally compelled to talk about them? Should amnesty be available to some? Should names be named in public? Should compensation go to victims? Should perpetrators apologize?

During the 1990s more than fifteen truth commissions were established, with the Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission being the first and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission being the most famous. In the last case Archbishop Desmond Tutu pioneered the model of truth and forgiveness by bringing together victims and perpetrators in an attempt to force a healing process, no matter how raw and painful.²⁷ In contrast Bouteflika has followed the model of post-Franco Spain, where, after Franco died in 1975, all sides agreed to forget the bloody divisions of the past. By the time of the amnesty in January 2000 it was already possible to see through the calculated vagueness and understand the civil concord as an act of repression. For the sake of peace Bouteflika was determined to bury the 1990s. There was to be no major inquisition about who was behind the violence; no coming to terms with the past. Recent history had to be cast aside.

Bouteflika sought to efface this immediate history by facing up to taboo aspects not of the immediate past but of the war of liberation. So, on 5 July 1999, the thirty-seventh anniversary of independence, Bouteflika announced that Tlemcen, Béjaïa, Hassi Messaoud and Biskra, four of the country's major airports, would carry the names of Messali Hadj, Abane Ramdane, Krim Belkacem and Mohammed Khider: all four controversial historical figures since the last three were assassinated by the secret services whilst Messali, as an opponent of the FLN, died in exile in 1974. At the time Bouteflika's gesture was portrayed as a brave move, an expression of his desire to build a more honest Algeria. Yet the establishment of these sites of public

ALGERIA

memory was a subtle sleight of hand. By projecting the image of a less regulated attitude to the past, open to pluralism and tolerant of difference, Bouteflika hoped to foster a more inclusive attitude to the present. Through a new public history of the liberation struggle, still the nation's foundation stone, Bouteflika wanted Algerians to put aside their divisions and foster common ideas about politics and compromise.

Bouteflika also looked further back into the past. One day after the rehabilitation of the forgotten leaders, the president gave a speech in Constantine recognizing the Jewish dimension of Algerian culture and the unique contribution of Jews in enriching the country's history and heritage. Equally, in August Bouteflika paid generous tribute to Monsignor Duval, the former archbishop of Algiers, recalling his soubriquet Mohammed Habib Duval and describing him as 'a true Algerian'. In November he proclaimed Saint Augustine as the father of the Algerian nation, telling students at Rome university in November 1999 that the fifth-century theologian was 'a son of Algeria and the most notable of the Fathers of the Church ... a saint as much for Christianity as for Islam'.²⁸

Such conciliatory language played well to many Western audiences. By explicitly rejecting those within the Islamist movement who talked of Jews and Christians as an alien presence, it conveyed an image of emancipation and democratization and suggested that Bouteflika's regime was willing to embrace the multifaceted aspects of Algerian culture. In agreeing that Judaism and Christianity were an integral part of Algerian history Bouteflika was laying the basis of a more tolerant national identity, seemingly challenging those historical narratives which had occluded vital aspects of the past.

But paradoxically this new approach came just at the moment when the government was trying to oblige all Algerians to draw a veil over its most recent past by following a policy of silence, evasion and selective memory. Through censorship, the intimidation of journalists and the control of access to paper and printing the

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

government attempted to tightly circumscribe any discussion of the 1990s which departed from the official script of the honourable army versus diabolical terrorists.²⁹ Unfortunately, what ordinary people had endured was just too traumatic to be swept away.

In the face of official amnesia, grassroots civilian pressure groups refused to be muzzled. As these groups absorbed the implications of the civil concord they did not want their history and experience to be denied or manipulated by the state. They wanted to express their pain and anger and believed that, in denying truth and justice, Bouteflika's transition process was fundamentally flawed.

This issue had been gathering momentum since 1997 when families, desperate to bring their plight to the attention of the national and international media, had organized protests outside barracks, police stations, prisons and detention centres where their relatives had disappeared. The following year these families had sent a letter to the visiting UN fact-finding mission listing in detail the circumstances of 239 cases, meaning that for the first time Algerians were fully confronted with a set of personal identities and precise facts.

The lead was taken by grieving mothers who, determined to give their anger a more effective organizational framework, established the National Association of the Families of the Disappeared and SOS-Disparus in 1998. Led by Nacéra Dutour and Lila Ighil respectively, their cause was also championed by Louisa Hanoune, leader of the Trotskyite Parti des Travailleurs, in the National Assembly.³⁰ Supported too by the FFS, Hanoune pursued a tireless campaign to break down official silence, and the government, also under intense pressure from international human rights organizations, was eventually forced to face up to the issue and acknowledged that disappearances had taken place on a huge scale. As a result the Office National des Droits de l'Homme (ONDH), a state organization established in 1992 to monitor human rights in the country, pinpointed 4,185 cases by the end of 1999. But it

ALGERIA

conveniently blamed all the disappearances on the armed groups, making little attempt to examine the role of the security forces, and its establishment was condemned by the civilian protest groups as a ploy to avoid more awkward questions.

The ‘mothers of the disappeared’ refused to stop their protests. Despite threats, harassment and a hate campaign that sought to stigmatize them as the mothers of ‘terrorists and throat cutters’, they carried on with their campaign, claiming that the figure of 4,185 was just the tip of the iceberg and that the figure actually ran into tens of thousands.³¹ Holding photographs and banners aloft they have held regular vigils outside the National Assembly and the Justice Ministry since 1998. At one point Bouteflika, harangued by placardwaving women during a public meeting, lost his temper and told them to forget their grief for the greater good of the nation.

The government had some ability to silence critical voices at home, but much less abroad. In France in particular there was a steady stream of revelations that the government could not control, led by the left-wing publisher La Découverte under the stewardship of commissioning editor François Gèze. The publisher had previously exposed the crimes of the French army during the war of independence through a series of graphic eyewitness accounts.³² Now, continuing with this tradition of dissent, La Découverte published two ground-breaking books, Nesroulah Yous’s *Qui a Tué à Bentalha?* in October 2000 and *La Sale Guerre* by Habib Souaïdia in February 2001, both of which catalogued in detail the shameful human rights abuses carried out by the Algerian army. Both became media events, with Yous’s book serialized in *Le Monde* whilst Souaïdia was extensively interviewed during the course of a special fifty-minute television documentary on *La Cinquième* on 27 May 2001.

Their revelations about the ‘dirty war’ were paralleled in the journalist Jean-Baptiste Rivoire’s television exposé of the events surrounding the death of Lounès Matoub, screened on 31 October

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

2000 on Canal Plus. Entitled *Algérie, la Grande Manip* (Algeria, the Great Manipulation) and drawing on a long series of interviews, the documentary challenged the official line that Hattab's groups were the culprits, pointing the finger at shadowy elements within the regime. Algerian exiles in France also confronted the violence through music and novels. On her debut CD, *Raoui*, released in 2000, Souad Massi's haunting acoustic music spoke eloquently about civilian pain and suffering, while Anouar Benmalek, Aziz Chouaki and Boualem Sansal wrote novels that were complex narratives of choices, actions and ambiguities, many miles from the simplistic dichotomies proclaimed by the government.³³

Away from France, Robert Fisk in the London-based *Independent* also consistently took a scalpel to the Algerian government's version of events, collecting hundreds of pages of evidence from Algerian lawyers and human rights workers that proved beyond doubt that the security services were guilty of torture, extra-judicial killings and 'disappearances'.³⁴ At the same time the highly controversial Qatar-based Arab satellite station Al-Jazeera, watched by millions across the Arab world, put Algerian human rights in the spotlight through a series of regular documentaries and interviews.³⁵ Indeed in a desperate attempt to stop Algerians from watching one Al-Jazeera documentary programme in January 1999 examining the role of the security forces in extrajudicial killings, the government shut down power to the major cities, including Algiers, ten minutes into the programme.³⁶ Thereafter, Bouteflika banned Al-Jazeera journalists indefinitely, after a further programme criticizing the reconciliation initiative.

The Algerian authorities went to great lengths to refute each of these allegations but the Bouteflika regime was forced to grapple with a new dimension: the all-pervasive impact of the internet. By 2001 anybody with web access could study the arguments and counter-arguments at the click of a button. They could not only download highly critical reports from Amnesty International and

ALGERIA

Human Rights Watch but also look at specific sites set up by Algerian dissidents such as Algeria-Watch, which carried extensive articles on all aspects of government abuses.³⁷ Of these the most famous and most mysterious site is that of the very well informed Mouvement Algérien des Officiers Libres (MAOL), supposedly based in Madrid and launched in 1997, which seems to be linked to higher echelons in the military. The roots of the MAOL can be traced back to the so-called Hakim Cell, a clandestine group of officers who believed in dialogue with the FIS.³⁸ Its members included Kasdi Merbah, whose 1993 murder was discussed in Chapter 6.³⁹ Consistently attacking a clique of criminal generals who are accused of deliberately orchestrating the violence for their economic gain, and calling on honest members of the military to rise up against this corruption, the site has contained a series of revelations about recent Algerian history, including details about state involvement in Boudiaf's assassination. It has also consistently called for a national conference on truth and reconciliation, an independent investigation into the violence and the prosecution of those implicated in the massacres.

In June 2000 the site posted up the secret details of the foreign accounts allegedly held by a number of leading generals, noting that Mohammed Touati had \$8 million with Crédit Lyonnais in Monaco; Mohammed Médiène \$62 million with UBP in Geneva; and Smaïn Lamari \$45 million with Crédit Suisse in Geneva. These figures were subsequently substantiated by the French press.⁴⁰ Not surprisingly the Bouteflika regime, unnerved by these revelations, was embarrassed at the site, and accused those behind it of being terrorists trying to manipulate public opinion against the whole transition process.⁴¹ But such mudslinging achieved nothing, and it became increasingly obvious that large numbers of Algerians were unwilling to follow Bouteflika down the road of forgetting.

URBAN ALIENATION

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

After all his foreign visits to Canada, Ethiopia and France, Bouteflika should make an official visit to the real Algeria.

(Algerian joke circa 2000)

By the beginning of 2001 there was widespread discontent with Bouteflika. One leading opinion poll noted that less than half of the population approved of the civil concord.⁴² Partly this was the result of growing dismay at the civil concord's implications; but partly too it was because throughout 2000 a viable economic programme eluded Bouteflika. He could not find a formula for recovery beyond the belief that liberalization would bring Algeria the benefits of globalization through a trickle-down effect.

For the younger generation in particular there was a glaring discrepancy between Bouteflika's ebullient salesmanship and the truth. Despite his ever-smiling public image, he had palpably failed to connect with them, as evidenced by one memorable incident in June 2000 in Oran when the president, heckled by university students, responded with a fit of pique, throwing out journalists and threatening to confiscate their tapes. The students' contempt reflected the way in which young people lumped the regime, the parties and the democratic process together. In their eyes the exercise of power was all part of the same sordid game, focused on narcissism, money and access to patronage. Caustically referring to the Club des Pins – the protected enclave outside Algiers where many of the elite lived – as 'Jurassic Park', they believed that the country was run by a clique of decrepit old men who had no idea how ordinary Algerians lived.⁴³

Such enduring anger reflected the way in which by 2001 the social crisis had taken on an aura of permanence. As the war became more rural, emigration to the major towns and cities had intensified. In Oran alone a hundred thousand people were living in shanty towns by 1996, over one-tenth of the city's total population, with the result

ALGERIA

that social services and housing provision, already overstretched, now reached breaking point. Of course these newcomers were grateful for the absence of the immediate threat of violence but in trying to eke out a better life they had to contend with non-existent services. Scraping a living on the fringes of society, they felt humiliated by both central and local government which, unable or unwilling to deal with the problem, seemed happy to let them languish in poverty.

Like the rest of the ordinary population, these migrants had to contend not only with the violence of the armed Islamists and the violence of the state but also what they saw as the violence of the IMF's prescriptions. The 1994 Structural Adjustment Programme aimed to demonstrate the benefits of the West's soft power by bringing the population into the virtuous circle of affluence, economic improvement and sound governance. On this measure the regime had managed to balance the books by 1997 and was held up as a success story by the IMF and World Bank.

However, far away from the luxury of the world's leading financial institutions, the reality was that the IMF reforms were heaping humiliation after humiliation on to Algerians. As the state withdrew there was no support to cushion the pain. Subsidies on basic foodstuffs were ended, public spending on social welfare and education was slashed, and state enterprises were either privatized or closed, leading to the loss of 380,000 jobs between 1994 and 1997. Promised redundancy payments never materialized and, as the state failed them, thousands were forced to survive through the black-market economy and family and civil society networks.

The conflict with the Islamists made it much easier to push these reforms through because ordinary people, reeling from an all-pervading violence, were simply too scared to contemplate mass social protest. Moreover there was no leadership from the official trade union organization, the Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens (UGTA), which maintained that with the Republic in

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

danger it had a duty to side with the government.⁴⁴

Pauperization affected all social classes and by 2001 the statistics made grim reading. On every front life was getting worse. Government budgets on health were savagely cut and, with most medication beyond the pockets of ordinary Algerians, the beginning of the new century witnessed the return of typhoid and meningitis.⁴⁵ Education spending was halved between 1985 and 1995 with the result that in 1997 only 39.3 per cent of young people were leaving school with a formal qualification.⁴⁶ Between 1991 and 2001 the value of salaries in real terms halved. By this latter date 27 per cent of the population were on less than one dollar a day, the official UN poverty level, and unemployment had reached a catastrophic 35 per cent, of which 80 per cent were aged under thirty. In January and February 1999 *La Tribune* and *Liberté* reported that in the Oran area impoverished rural families were selling their young children to survive, and in 2001 UNICEF reported that 1.36 million children between six and fifteen were being forced to work to survive the economic crisis.⁴⁷ In 2002 *Liberté* reported on a new and disturbing product of the economic crisis: an epidemic of suicides amongst young men.⁴⁸

Looking at these indices it was difficult not to conclude that between 1980 and 2000 Algeria had not lost one but two generations. However, as the threat of terrorism receded in 2000 people became much less submissive. The downward turn in violence sharpened their sense of antagonism towards the system and gave them renewed energy, leading directly to an upsurge in militancy and social opposition. On 17 May 2000, for example, police used rubber bullets and tear gas to break up a demonstration by nine thousand strikers protesting against the freezing of salaries at the El Hadjar steel works at Annaba; twenty to thirty protestors were seriously injured. Angry at the absence of a socio-economic revival, the mass of Algerians, but particularly the young, laid the blame on Bouteflika, asking why the oil and gas revenues were not being used to create a

ALGERIA

wealthy and prosperous society for all. In November 2001 hatred of the regime reached a new high when more than six hundred people died due to flash floods sweeping through the poor districts of the capital. Riots broke out as it became clear that the humanitarian disaster was in large part down to government incompetence. The crucial factor here had been the authorities' decision in 1997 to cement up the ancient drains in Bab el-Oued leading down to the sea, to prevent armed Islamists lurking in the sewers. Nobody had thought to unblock them later, despite the national meteorologist's office warning both the president's office and the interior minister that high winds were on their way.

The fact that the government took no steps to alert the city's 4 million inhabitants of the approaching peril led numerous Algerians to speak subsequently of 'genocide through negligence'. This outrage was intensified when the interior minister, Yazid Zerhouni, blamed the people, arguing that by living in flimsy shanty towns they had left themselves vulnerable and unprotected. Such comments just piled further derision on the government, which was seen as a regime in a generalized state of denial, always seeking to apportion responsibility elsewhere when it was obvious that the disaster was the result of a complete failure to implement city planning or provide adequate housing for the population.

In an effort to assuage public opinion Bouteflika declared three days of national mourning, but in a television appearance he appealed to religious feeling to deflect criticism, claiming, 'This is a test from God, nobody can blame God for what he gives us ... neither the government nor any party is responsible, God is testing us.' Such sentiments, terribly misjudged, just inflamed the situation, reinforcing the image of endemic incompetence. As *Le Matin* sarcastically commented: 'Bouteflika blames God for blocking the drains.'⁴⁹ In the same vein *El Watan* accused the president of not liking 'either Algiers or the Algerians', reminding the president that Algerians 'did not elect him, whatever the official election results say'.⁵⁰

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Determined to give vent to their anger hundreds of youths from Bab el- Oued gathered in front of the Algiers Government Palace on the evening of 12 November. As they protested they shouted slogans ranging from 'pouvoir assassin' to the Kabyle cry 'Ulaç S'mah Ulaç' ('No forgiveness, none') and the historic rallying cry of the FIS, 'There is no God but God. We live for this profession of faith, we will die for it.'⁵¹ For the first time in Algiers, some demonstrators openly praised Osama bin Laden while others chanted the nicknames of two former Islamist terrorists previously active in the casbah, 'Flicha' and 'Napoli'. The crowd tried to break down the doors of the government building but were beaten back by police, whereupon they turned back in procession to Bab el-Oued, smashing shop windows and wrecking cars as they went. At the base of these protests was the demand to be treated with dignity. Ordinary people were livid at the regime's incompetence and Bouteflika's reputation was badly damaged.

Two years later Bouteflika's image was dented still further when an earthquake struck the region of Boumerdès, east of Algiers, on 23 May 2003, causing the loss of two thousand lives, with thousands more left injured and homeless. Sub-standard state-built housing blocks collapsed, largely because the government had scrimped on materials, while private buildings from the French period survived. The singers Rachid Taha, Cheb Khaled and Faudel released a special CD in France to raise money for the victims but the success of their initiative only underlined the shortcomings of the government's response. Once again too the relief operation was a fiasco and when Bouteflika travelled to Boumerdès to survey the damage an angry crowd kicked and stoned his car, shouting 'pouvoir assassin'.⁵²

Both the floods and the earthquake contributed to the tinder-box atmosphere. By shining the light back on to the system they revealed the continuing gulf between the rulers and the ruled. Ordinary Algerians were dismayed when the state of emergency was prolonged for another year in February 2000, and many began to suspect that

ALGERIA

this repressive legislation was not the exception but the norm. By keeping the people down, it made them too scared to challenge a liberalization process which in favouring the black market allowed a minority to profit from kickbacks, fraud and tax evasion on a grand scale. As one popular joke put it: 'Why is the Algerian mafia better than the Italian mafia? Because it owns a whole country.'

More than ever, anger, chagrin and consternation were the norm. During the 1980s raï music had given voice to this generational conflict. Now there was a burgeoning rap scene with bands like Intik, an ironic name meaning 'everything going great' in spoken Arabic, T.O.X. and Game Over. Many of the rappers had been involved as teenagers in October 1988 and their street poetry, heavily influenced by Public Enemy in America and IAM in France, but also drawing upon the oral tradition at the heart of Algerian culture, articulated gut-level male anger. Mixing together hip-hop, reggae, soul, chaâbi and raï as well as switching from classical Arabic to spoken Arabic, Berber, French and English, the result was a musical montage whose inner content raged against the *pouvoir*. Disaffection, unemployment and elemental defiance were their themes as these musicians spoke in a language of fearlessness with no reservations or omissions. As one Intik song explained:

Manipulation, aggression, deception
Such is my programme for the day
My only crime is to hope and to dream⁵³

The pioneers of the movement were four rappers, Redone, Yacine, Med and Rabah, known collectively as Le Micro Brise le Silence. They organized the first rap concerts in Algiers in 1993 and they produced the first ever Algerian rap album in 1997, the cassette Ouled El Bahdja which sold sixty thousand copies; and they enjoyed the first international acclaim, signing up to Island records and releasing their first CD, Micro Brise le Silence, in November 1999.

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Inspired by the novelist Tahar Djaout, who had been assassinated in May 1993, their starting point was a refusal to be silenced. The spoken word allowed them to struggle against official amnesia and bear witness to the hellish existence of their generation, where Algerians were citizens little more than in name as authority was abused at every level. As such their remarkable music encapsulates the enduring tensions at the heart of Algerian society. On the one side is the system – the police, the military, the politicians – and on the other is the majority who feel downtrodden, despised and disenfranchised.

* * *

In Kabylia, still seething with anger at Matoub's death, there was a permanent stand-off between the population and the forces of law and order throughout 1999 and 2000. In this volatile atmosphere the traditional parties, the RCD and FFS, were seen as out of date and compromised as Kabylia witnessed the sudden emergence of a new type of grassroots politics based upon village councils.⁵⁴ As we saw in Chapter 1, these councils are deeply ingrained in Kabyle culture. Male-dominated and encapsulating traditional codes of honour, they represent the fierce independence of the mountain republics in the face of the intrusion of the plains. Some saw them as archaic while others talked of them as the basis of a citizens' movement. In April 2001, the twentyfirst anniversary of the Berber spring, these assemblies bypassed the old parties to challenge the power of central government.

The trigger for the violence was the death of a youth called Massinissah Guermah in police custody. Guermah had been picked up by police, intervening over fighting between rival gangs of youths, on 18 April and badly beaten up. Hauled off to the station at Beni Douala in Tizi-Ouzou, he was shot there at close range and died of his wounds two days later.⁵⁵ In a bid to justify the killing

ALGERIA

the gendarmerie released a communiqué claiming that Guermah had been arrested for theft. The Interior Ministry also tried to dirty Guermah's name by declaring that he was a twenty-six-year-old hooligan. Furious, his family brandished his school report, showing that he was in fact an eighteen-year-old secondary school student with a good academic record.

Such lies, allied to the arrest of three more college students, were highly provocative and throughout the region there were protests attacking the police abuse of power, social injustice and lack of freedom. Shouting the slogan 'Give us work, lodgings and hope', these demonstrations sought to dominate space and opinion but although peaceful they were ferociously repressed by the baton-wielding gendarmerie and the special anti-riot police. Inevitably these crude tactics just produced more violence. Protestors now took out their anger on the symbols of the state, attacking town halls and tax collecting offices while taunting the police by proclaiming 'Hassan Hattab, the People are with you'.⁵⁶

In the weeks that followed, the police violence in Kabylia reached unprecedented levels. During the riots following Matoub's death the police had had strict instructions not to fire on the crowd. Now there was no such restraint. Drawing extensively upon eyewitness accounts gathered at the time, a subsequent report by the Algerian League of the Defence of the Rights of Man produced a damning portrait of an out-of-control police force that revelled in its capacity to inflict pain and terror on the civilian population. Extra-judicial killing became the norm; on 25 April five fleeing protestors were killed by the police (one, Kamel Makhmoukhen, was shot in the back), and three days later in the village of Aït-Yahia local police fired on the crowd killing sixteen-year-old Chaibet Hocine. Police snipers hiding on terraces cold-bloodedly picked off demonstrators, even those trying to help the wounded.⁵⁷ Snatch squads, some of which were the elite army units – the 'red berets' – disguised as police, chased youths into hospitals, beating them up and shooting

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

at them on the ground. Suspects were stripped naked and battered with iron bars. Police were also seen spitting on the dead bodies.

Kabylia rapidly became a war zone with the forces of law and order demolishing houses, ransacking shops, and cutting telephone wires, thereby isolating the region from the rest of the country. In El-Kseur a member of the Algerian Red Cross witnessed a day of violence that left 365 casualties as the police surrounded a clinic and barred the wounded from entering: 'The CNS [Compagnie Nationale de Sécurité, the special riot police] and gendarmerie, drunk, let themselves loose on the population. They threw tear gas into houses ... they pillaged shops, ransacked a chemist's and attacked a handicapped man, breaking his leg in his own house.'⁵⁸ In some cases civilians heard police taunting protestors, 'We are going to do to you what we did at Bentahla.'

Bouteflika was roundly condemned for saying nothing immediately and for remaining in Nigeria on an official visit as the violence spiralled out of control. Only after ten days of rioting and forty-three deaths did he finally intervene on 30 April with an unconvincing television address. Insensitively delivered in classical Arabic, which would not have been understood by large numbers of Algerians and certainly not in Kabylia, Bouteflika's address called on Kabyle youth to remain calm. At the same time he made no attempt to rein in the police. Nobody was sacked and he did not give the order to stop firing on crowds. His one major attempt to assuage the protestors was the announcement of an independent commission of inquiry to be chaired by Professor Mohand Issad, a well-known Kabyle lawyer.

Predictably, Bouteflika's performance led to renewed rioting. In an attempt to channel this anger into a mass movement the village councils organized a march attended by five hundred thousand people on 21 May in Tizi-Ouzou, along with a platform of specific demands. This was followed by a demonstration against injustice and repression on 14 June in Algiers, which brought together one

ALGERIA

million marchers, the biggest such protest in the country's history. However, even before the march had begun, agents provocateurs tried to turn the march into an ethnic confrontation. Youths perched on the security forces' water cannons chanting 'death to the Kabyles' and threw stones. At least a hundred young people disappeared and many more were badly beaten. Later, in the emergency unit of the Mustapha hospital, youths with knives mingled amongst the doctors and nurses and threatened the injured. For El Watan such violence, pushing the country to the brink of civil war, showed just how far the hardliners were willing to stop the establishment of a genuine democracy that will return 'Algeria to Algerians' and purge the country of the 'new colonialists'.⁵⁹

By 30 June the 'black spring' had left an estimated two hundred dead and five thousand injured. In surveying this carnage Professor Issad's report, published on 7 July, was remarkably frank.⁶⁰ Although the report refrained from naming individuals it pinpointed faction fighting within the regime as the chief reason for the gendarmes' brutality. The implication was that key figures had deliberately stoked up the violence, playing on the threat of the Kabyles as pro-French fifth columnists, so that Bouteflika would have blood on his hands and hence be discredited. The report was a damning portrait of a government operating without the most basic aspects of democratic control and accountability, in other words a lawless regime. Furthermore, in analysing the wider social causes Issad's diagnosis was bleak: 'Guermah's death ... [was] only the immediate cause of the troubles. The deeper causes rest elsewhere: social, economic, political, identity and abuses of all sorts.'

Such comments recognized that the absence of hope was the true root of the protests. Why else would the rioters show such reckless indifference to the shoot-to-kill policy, shouting, 'You cannot kill us, we are already dead' as they took on the police?⁶¹

The severity of the repression, widely reported in the European media, meant that the Algerian government was faced with renewed

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

pressure over human rights. In particular the EU, under the Swedish presidency, wanted to call the government to account over the handling of the violence in Kabylia. Seemingly tottering on the edge of chaos, the regime was suddenly once again isolated on the international scene. What was to save it were the extraordinary events of 11 September 2001.

ISLAMIC TERRORISM TAKES CENTRE STAGE

On a clear blue morning on 11 September 2001 nineteen young Arab men, mostly from Saudi Arabia, seized four US airliners, which they crashed into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. These attacks were the most audacious terrorist plot in modern history. Succeeding where all the other precedents – the 1993 attack on the twin towers, the 1994 GIA attempt on the Eiffel Tower, the failed attack on Los Angeles airport in 1999 – had failed, 9/11 was theatrical violence on the grandest scale imaginable, resulting in the death of 2,973 people. Instinctively there was a wave of sympathy with America. *Le Monde* proclaimed ‘We are all Americans now’ as flowers piled up outside US embassies from Argentina to Australia. Women in Jordan signed petitions of condolence; candles and banners were held aloft in Bangladesh; the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat gave blood; and children stood for one minute’s silence on the West Bank.

In this moment the international context was changed for ever. As President Bush plotted revenge, he and his inner entourage made swift decisions about who was a friend and who was a foe. They knew that their most precious resource was intelligence, and that in piecing together a global picture of Islamic terrorism they needed the help of those with an inside view into the values, motivations and mindsets of al-Qaeda and its fellow organizations. For this reason the Bouteflika regime was immediately identified as a vital ally in the ‘war on terror’.

ALGERIA

In the days following 11 September Bush called for a 'crusade' on world terror. For Muslims it was unfortunate choice of words but even so the Algerian leadership immediately grasped the implications of the Bush strategy for them and their regime. Just one month earlier the Algerian government had been facing international opprobrium over the repression in Kabylia, but now they had Washington's backing. In exchange for intelligence they gained all they could desire, in particular the knowledge that the United States would keep the regime afloat financially and militarily. Bouteflika and Mohammed Lamari were invited to Washington in November 2001 for a week-long visit during which they presented the Algerian experience as the major precedent for 11 September. In return Bush unambiguously endorsed the Algerian regime's counter-terrorist strategy while drawing up a plan for Algeria to enter into an association agreement with NATO together with Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan.

The Bouteflika government carefully distilled the information it handed over to the CIA. It had a vested interest in portraying the GIA and the GSPC as bin Laden foot soldiers, part of a tightly organized worldwide conspiracy that had been attacking Algeria since 1992. Washington, however, took the Algerians at their word. As the knowledge travelled 'up the chain', policy makers sifting through this intelligence at second-, third- and fourth-hand ignored evidence of secret service manipulation or the fact that some of it had been extracted by torture. Rather than seeing the Algerian information as partial, incomplete and suspect they accepted the existence of the GIA and GSPC as a given and immediately placed them on the list of banned terrorist organizations.

Of course the links between the armed groups in Algeria and bin Laden are not a fiction. They are real and tangible and predate 11 September 2001, even if the actual relationship is more complex than the simplistic identification between the two that the pro-government media now asserted at every possible moment. All

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Islamist groups became by definition linked to al-Qaeda and on 20 September 2001 the television and radio reported that Algiers had already handed over to Washington a list of 350 Islamist militants known to be abroad whom Algerian intelligence believed were likely to be linked to bin Laden. The Algerian authorities were also reported to have provided a list of two thousand names of 'known members of the GIA and the GSPC'. In response to these measures, a GSPC communiqué on 19 September threatened to target Westerners in Algeria if Afghanistan was attacked, whereupon security was intensified around Western embassies and businesses. This belief in a close link between bin Laden and Algeria was strengthened even further when, less than a month after 11 September, an international friendly between France and Algeria at the Stade de France football stadium near Paris, intended as a gesture of historic reconciliation between the two countries, was dramatically abandoned because young Algerian supporters, mostly French citizens of Algerian descent, invaded the pitch shouting 'Bin Laden, bin Laden' and hurling abuse at the French players.

Bolstered by American support, the army continued to inflict serious reverses on the remnants of armed groups, including most spectacularly the killing of Antar Zouabri in February 2002. To allay suspicion (following the many false claims that he had been liquidated in the past), his bullet-ridden body was displayed to the public. With their infamous emir dead the GIA was said to have been reduced to about a hundred fighters dispersed across the hinterland of Algiers in small units while another small group operated at Sidibel-Abbès, the old Foreign Legion headquarters town.

Zouabri's death was heralded as another step on the road to normalization, which was further cemented by the legislative elections held on 30 May 2002. The results gave the FLN a slender majority with 199 of the 389 seats in the new National Assembly. Abdullah Djaballah's Movement for National Reform (MRN) won 43 seats, overtaking Mahfoud Nahnah's Movement of Society for

ALGERIA

Peace (MSP) which fell from 69 to 38 seats, but the overall Islamist presence in the assembly fell by a fifth. The Worker's Party (Parti des Travailleurs, PT), led by Louisa Hanoune, won the largest secular democratic vote, garnering 21 seats.⁶²

On the face of it the results suggested a flourishing pluralism. But the reality was different. The turnout was just over 46 per cent, the lowest since independence, and the Berber parties had boycotted the elections as a result of the continuing violence in Kabylia.⁶³ Similarly the FLN's astonishing recovery was manufactured by the regime rather than being the expression of the popular will. The decision amongst the elite to resuscitate the FLN was already clear in August 2000 when Ali Benflis, a member of the FLN leadership, was named prime minister. This was deemed necessary because the RND, associated with draconian economic policies and tainted with corruption, was so discredited.

The promotion by the powers that be of the FLN at the expense of the RND demonstrates how pluralism allowed the parties to be played off against each other by a system whose modus operandi is divide and rule. With this aim in mind all the main ideological tendencies are represented in the National Assembly and ideally in the government itself, but to prevent any political party from acquiring too much influence each tendency is represented by at least two parties. So there are the two 'nationalist' parties, the FLN and RND, three Islamist parties, the MSP, MRN and MN (Mouvement Ennahda or 'Resistance Party', also known as the Islamic Resistance Party), two Berber parties, the FFS and RCD, and two parties of the left, the PT and the small but formerly influential Democratic and Social Movement (MDS). Since the parties in each category are rivals rather than allies, the scope which the regime enjoys for exploiting their rivalries is enormous. At the same time, it has been able to take account of changes in public opinion by orchestrating changes in the electoral fortunes of the various rivals at regular intervals.⁶⁴

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Understood in this way, the elections were not really elections. They were pseudo-elections based on the exclusion of the electorate because the main results were determined in advance by the regime's 'decision-makers'. The only role the people had was a walk-on role to ratify their choices, which in May 2002 meant the return of the FLN.

THE TRIAL

At midnight on 25 April 2001 Khaled Nezzar, in Paris to reject the claims of army abuses of human rights, was whisked away and put on a special flight back to Algiers. For a man of his military rank it was an unceremonious exit, prompted by the French authorities who were desperate to avoid an embarrassing international incident. Just a few hours before, civil lawsuits had been filed against Nezzar, one by an Algerian family whose son had died in custody and two by ex-prisoners tortured by the army, and under the 1984 International Convention against Torture France would have been obliged to take up their cases in court.

The situation bore strong echoes of the detention of the former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in Britain in 1998. Indeed, in an editorial *Le Monde* likened Nezzar to Pinochet but said that he was worse because he had more blood on his hands.⁶⁵ For this reason the Nezzar incident was a political earthquake. It struck fear amongst the other leading generals in Algiers since it showed that they were not safe from prosecution. The spectre of future trials for human rights abuses had been raised.

Incensed by those who called his departure cowardly, Nezzar took it upon himself to defend the Algerian army's honour. On 22 August 2001 he organized a press conference in Algiers where he called on all those who supported the cancellation of the elections in January 1992 to defend him and the army. Specifically Nezzar wished to uphold the honour of the army in the face of charges of dirty tricks

ALGERIA

made by Habib Souaïdia in his book *La Sale Guerre*, published by La Découverte in February 2001.

Souaïdia had himself been an officer in the feared ‘ninjas’, created to lead the counter-insurgency in 1993. Fighting in the Mitidja and then Lakhdaria, 75 miles south-east of Algiers, Souaïdia was accused of theft in June 1995 and sentenced by court martial to four years in a military prison. Released in 1999 and believing his life to be in danger he made his way to France where he wrote *La Sale Guerre*. In it he gave a detailed account of the systematic use of torture, napalm and massacres, including soldiers murdering civilians and then attributing these crimes to Islamist armed groups.

It was a damning description of an army out of control, whereby the war against terrorism had long degenerated into racketeering, extortion and financial aggrandisement. In the preface the distinguished anti-Mafia Italian lawyer Ferdinando Imposimato emphasized the book’s importance, arguing that by providing an inside picture of the hidden centres of power it showed that the regime had a case to answer under international law.⁶⁶

In France the book was a publishing sensation. It was number one on the bestseller lists for several weeks and widely discussed in the *New York Times*, the *Irish Times*, the *Guardian*, *El Pais* and *La Repubblica*. In Algeria Souaïdia was subjected to a character assassination. As the son of a *barki*, the regime claimed, he was by definition a traitor whose hatred for his country had been sharpened still further by his period in prison. In March 2001, 250 progovernment intellectuals signed a petition claiming that the vast majority of the population supported the army in its difficult struggle against terrorism. Then on 29 April Souaïdia was condemned in absentia to twenty years in prison for attacking the army’s integrity.

While the official response was entirely predictable, other anti-government voices raised their concerns about Souaïdia’s account. One Algerian journalist, Mina Kaci, was dubious about parts of the book,⁶⁷ and Hugh Roberts, no friend of the military, pointed out

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

some glaring factual errors.⁶⁸ In particular, a bomb attack at the cemetery in Sidi Ali was dated as 1992 when it actually occurred two years later, and the author wrongly named General Saïd Bey as commander of the 1st Military Region in 1993 and early 1994. Most of all Roberts was highly sceptical about the massacre at Douar Ez-Zaatria, which Souaïdia claimed took place in March 1993; however, this is much too early and the book is much too vague to be convincing on this point. Reports of civilian massacres, Roberts argued, only came to light in late 1996 and early 1997.

These mistakes apart, however, Roberts was still adamant that Souaïdia's book, in describing an institution that had lost all sense of its proper constitutional role, represented a savage indictment of the army's role. Souaïdia repeated his views when interviewed on the French television channel La Cinquième on 27 May 2001.⁶⁹ Pushed by the interviewer, Souaïdia did not hang back, singling out Nezzar and his clique as the men who had wilfully led Algeria to catastrophe:

It is cowards who profit from it [the war], this is exactly what has happened in our country, it is the former deserters of the French army who have led the country towards anarchy, towards bankruptcy. It is they who are responsible.⁷⁰

When he uttered these words Souaïdia was being deliberately provocative. He was throwing down the gauntlet, challenging both the general's manhood and his sense of place in history, and on 24 August 2001 Nezzar issued a writ for libel.

Lasting from 2 to 5 July 2002 and held in Paris, the ensuing trial, ironically, coincided with the fortieth anniversary of independence. Witnesses for Nezzar included the writer Rachid Boudjedra, the former minister Leïla Aslaoui, and Ali Haroun, formerly a member of the Haut Comité d'Etat. For Souaïdia on the defence side were the historian and former FLN member Mohammed Harbi, the

ALGERIA

political refugee and former colonel in the Algerian secret services Mohammed Samraoui, and the president of the FFS and war of liberation veteran Hocine Aït Ahmed. Thus many of the dramatis personae of the past decade were present and, as each was called up to the box, at the core of the arguments and cross examinations was the question of justification. Who was responsible for the violence? Was the suspension of the electoral process right? Did it save Algeria from a worse fate? In effect the trial represented the historical inquest on the 1990s that Bouteflika had been so desperate to curtail. For once, rather than forgetting, both sides were intent on addressing blame and culpability head-on.

Through his testimony and subsequent interventions Nezzar was determined to depict the violence of the 1990s through the prism of 11 September 2001. In his opening statement he argued that in terms of ideology and action the FIS were the Algerian equivalent of the Taliban, part of a global plot threatening the whole of humanity.⁷¹ By suspending the elections and fighting this enemy the army had saved the country from barbarity, anticipating the post-9/11 'war on terror'. Such was the language in which Nezzar and many of his key witnesses constructed their arguments, echoing the polarized vocabulary of President Bush.

Much of the evidence called upon by Nezzar's lawyers was undeniably harrowing. When two women, Attika Hadjrissa and Saâdia Hadjrissa, described their ordeals at the hands of GIA groups, everybody in the courtroom recognized the depth of their suffering.⁷² The problem, however, was that the prosecution's argument – an army defending a population under brutal terrorist attacks– did not fit all the facts. When Nezzar tried to call the disappeared 'martyrs in the war on terror' other narratives were just too resistant. What, the defence countered, about the victims of state terrorism? What too about the role of the system? One of the defence witnesses, the economist Omar Bendarra, who possessed enormous inside knowledge since he had managed the national debt

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

between 1989 and 1991, explained how a minority had been able to exploit the violence to accrue massive fortunes.⁷³ Another defence witness, Mohammed Harbi, compared Algeria since 1962 to Prussia in the eighteenth century, describing it as a military regime where the army controlled the state rather than the other way round.⁷⁴

Bringing so many of the key figures head to head, the debate was conducted in an atmosphere of simmering rage, producing moments of real drama. When Nezzar argued that it was normal for secret services to use infiltration, Samraoui retorted angrily 'But not massacres, my general.'⁷⁵ The intensity of the arguments meant that the level of detail was uniquely illuminating, exposing much of the inner workings of a secretive system for the first time.

At the end of the four days Nezzar lost the case. In different circumstances such a verdict might have dealt a major international blow against the system. But the regime could afford to dismiss the Nezzar trial as irrelevant when compared to the bigger international picture. Given the legitimacy bestowed on them by the Bush administration their self-confidence was impossible to stem. By 2003 previously secretive figures like Mohammed Lamari were prepared to come out and declare openly that they had won. The bloody decade 1993–2003, he declared, was now over. The country had not gone the way of Afghanistan and was now returning to normal, as was evident by the resumption of Air France and British Airways flights to Algiers after their boycotting of Algerian airports for years, and the fact that 2003 was designated 'the year of Algeria' in France with a series of exhibitions and special events. The final symbol of this victory came when on 2 July 1993 the regime released Abassi Madani and Ali Belhadj, now that they had finished their twelve-year prison sentences. Now aged seventy-two and forty-seven respectively, they were banned from all forms of political activity and not allowed to vote. Significantly, their freedom did not provoke a huge public reaction, with Madani going into exile while Belhadj remained as a brooding presence, constantly harassed by

ALGERIA

the authorities.

* * *

Although Bouteflika had unflinchingly endorsed the Bush administration's campaign against terrorism he conducted a delicate balancing act in the runup to the Second Gulf War, which began in 2003. Not wishing to jeopardize the American alliance but mindful too of the population's instinctive antiimperialism, he chose his words with care. Stopping well short of any outright condemnation, he criticized Washington for not following international law and said that the war 'would not be something for humanity to be proud of'.⁷⁶ Remembering how the First Gulf War had destabilized Algerian politics, he was careful to contain public anger. Despite the media's strident attacks on American imperialism, he did not permit protests against the war in Iraq. He wanted to keep a tight rein on anti-American sentiment lest this anger should spill over into criticism of his own regime. The one moment of public outpouring came with the visit on 2 March of President Chirac, whose opposition to the Iraq invasion, fitting into the long tradition of Gaullist anti-Americanism, was rapturously acclaimed in Algiers.

Back in Britain the activities of Algerians supposedly linked to bin Laden played a crucial role in the lead-up to the Iraq invasion in March 2003. Until the 1990s Algerians had been almost unknown in Britain, with only twentyfive asylum applications in 1990. By 1995 this number had risen to 1,865. Most were genuine asylum-seekers, but not all. One regular visitor to the Finsbury Park mosque and the Four Feathers community centre, a makeshift place of worship near Baker Street, was Abu 'The Doctor' Doha, a thirtyseven-year-old Algerian who was identified by French secret services as a senior GSPC member involved in establishing terror networks in London.⁷⁷ In February 2001 he was arrested at Heathrow trying to board a flight to Saudi Arabia. Another was Rachid Ramda, editor

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

of the paper Al-Ansar which glorified GIA atrocities. The French accused him of being the mastermind behind the 1995 Paris Métro bombing and began a lengthy extradition process to get him to stand trial in France.

These two examples explain why the Algerian community in Britain, numbering twelve thousand by 2003, was coming under increasing surveillance. The domestic security agency MI5 had information that GSPC cells were about to launch a huge attack using ricin, one of the most lethal poisons known to humanity, and as a result the Algerian population became the focus of one of the biggest anti-terrorist operations ever mounted in Britain. Four North Africans, named as Mustapha Taleb, Mouloud Feddag, Sidali Feddag and Samir Feddag, and all thought to be Algerian, were arrested in January 2003 and charged under the UK's Chemical Weapons Act of 1996 after police discovered traces of ricin in a North London flat in Wood Green following a protracted Anglo-French surveillance operation. In Manchester a group of Algerians were cornered by the police and during the course of their arrests a policeman, DC Stephen Oake, was killed. The two operations were presented by the British secret services as a radical new departure, suggesting that Algerian Islamist terrorism had moved on to a new level. Previously content to use the country as a logistical base for attacks in France and Algeria, procuring forged passports and credit cards, the Algerians now wanted to attack Britain itself.

The precise nature of their activities, particularly an alleged plan to attack the London Underground, provoked a furore amongst the press and politicians, which prime minister Tony Blair played up to the hilt as tangible evidence of the link between the threat of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction; if the terrorists had no qualms about deploying ricin, what would they do with nuclear or chemical weapons? Such language conjured up untold horrors. Playing on people's fears, it was intended to overcome widespread public scepticism and opposition to the coming invasion of Iraq.

ALGERIA

The Second Gulf War led to the rapid fall of Saddam Hussein but postvictory euphoria was short-lived and soon British and American forces were engaged in savage wars of violence and counter-violence, much of it evoking Algeria both in 1950s and the 1990s. However, in the frantic forward rush of events many forgot the role of the Algerian ricin threat in the justifications for the war, which was relegated to footnote status. But in April 2005 the four were acquitted, embarrassing the British government, police and security services. Their trial revealed that no traces of ricin had been found in the Wood Green flat occupied by the suspects. Indeed the 2003 Algerian panic led to only one conviction, of Kamel Bourgass, who was given a life sentence for the murder of DC Stephen Oake in Manchester.

Three jurors from the trial in October 2005 condemned the British government's new anti-terrorism legislation. One juror told the BBC's Panorama programme: 'Before the trial I had a lot of faith in the authorities to be making the right decisions on my behalf ... having been through this trial I'm very sceptical now as to the real reasons why this new legislation is being pushed through.'⁷⁸

The case underlined the danger of demonizing Algerians as potential terrorists, and showed how the war on terror was shot through with the potential for mistakes, shortcomings and potential miscarriages of justice.⁷⁹ A related issue concerned security evidence from Algeria, which was often tainted by torture. The Director General of MI5, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, was adamant that evidence extracted by torture in Algeria could save lives, citing the example of Bourgass, whom MI5 had been informed about by Algerian secret services.

Elsewhere Algerians and French people of Algerian origin became subject to intense surveillance, especially after the Madrid train bombings on 11 March 2004, which killed 191. The security services tracked their movements throughout Europe and America, resulting in a steady flurry of trials and arrests. In February 2005

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

the French police rounded up more than twenty suspects in the La Courneuve suburb of Paris. One of the group's ringleaders allegedly confessed that they were making chemical weapons, using knowledge gleaned from training camps run by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and at secret bases in the Panski Gorge, a lawless region linking Georgia with war-torn Chechnya. Similarly, on 15 March a French court sentenced a French Algerian man to ten years in prison for plotting a suicide attack on the US Embassy in Paris in 2001 and jailed five accomplices, all also of Algerian origin, for one to nine years. Djamel Beghal received the toughest term possible under French law as the ringleader of the failed plot.⁸⁰

The panic about Algerian terrorism further strengthened Western support for Bouteflika's regime. In particular the Bush administration welcomed the reversals inflicted by the army on the GSPC, notably the killing of 150 militants in September 2003 near Sétif and the seizing of a major weapons arsenal along Algeria's southern border with Mali in January 2004.

By this point the GSPC seemed to be on the verge of defeat, especially after reports of Hattab's resignation as leader and his subsequent death in August 2003. However, Hattab's successor, Nabil Sahrawi, continued to spit defiance, telling the *Al-Hayat* newspaper in January: 'The Islamic state will not arise through means of slogans, demonstrations, parties and electioneering but through blood, body parts, and [sacrifice of] lives.'⁸¹ But he too was killed on 19 June 2004 during a three-day gun battle with the Algerian armed forces as they conducted a huge search and destroy sweep in the El-Kseur region in Bejaia province two hundred miles east of Algiers.

As the net tightened one GSPC group, led by Abderrezak 'El-Para', was credited in June 2003 with staging the spectacular kidnapping of thirty-two European tourists, most of them German, travelling across the Sahara. One hostage was freed in a raid by Algerian soldiers but the rest were forced to trek from wadi to

ALGERIA

wadi on the way into Mali; an ordeal which led to the death of a German woman. Eventually they were released on 18 August following payment of a \$5 million ransom by Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Interviewed on German television, one of the hostages, Gerhard Wintersteller, commented:

The Salafists were well aware of what was about to happen. They marched us twenty kilometres through the desert to a predetermined location, a geographically suitable venue for our 'liberation'. It occurred to me much later that the whole thing might have been staged by the Algerian military. I still wonder if there are links between the Salafists and the army.⁸²

Writing in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Selima Mellah and Jean-Baptiste Rivoire revealed that 'El-Para', otherwise known as Amari Saifi, was chief bodyguard to Khaled Nezzar, from 1990 to 1993, an unusual background for a terrorist leader, whilst a video passed on to the CIA claiming him as 'a lieutenant of bin Laden' was shown to be a fake. For these reasons they suggested that the abduction may have been concocted by the Algerian secret services or sponsored by them to help the campaign for more post-9/11 American support.⁸³

Certainly the kidnapping of the Western tourists, as well as the news that the GSPC were planning to kidnap competitors on the 2004 Paris–Dakar rally as they drove through Mali, gave added urgency to the American offensive against al-Qaeda in the region, the so-called Pan-Sahel Initiative.⁸⁴ Fearing that the impoverished southern fringe of the Sahara – the intersection between North and West Africa – could become a safe haven for terrorism, American special forces set out to impose order. Working with Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal, they sent in small, highly mobile units that could defeat the GSPC on the ground. In March 2004 the American European Command sent a Navy P-3 Orion surveillance aircraft to sweep the area, relaying Saifi's position to

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

soldiers from Chad, Niger and Nigeria in the region. In the resultant fighting forty-three GSPC members were killed as Saifi was pursued into Mali, Niger and Chad, only to be captured by a Chadian anti-government group, the Movement for Democracy and Justice, who after much negotiation handed him over to Algeria at the end of October 2004.

Two months later Saifi was reportedly backing Bouteflika's plan for a general amnesty and this led many to wonder whether he was a DRS agent who, by keeping the al-Qaeda threat in place, had ensured the continuation of the 'war on terrorism' dividend.⁸⁵ As a result of all this counter-insurgency action, the budget for pan-Sahel agreement increased from \$7 million to \$125 million in 2005.

BOUTEFLIKA: FRIEND AND ALLY

'Washington has much to learn from Algeria on ways to fight terrorism,' commented William Burns, the American Deputy Secretary of State for North African Affairs, speaking on 9 December 2002 at the end of an official visit to Algeria, which concluded with an agreement to sell counter-terrorist military equipment to Algiers, thereby ending an embargo in place since the cancellation of elections in 1992. Such endorsements continued throughout 2003 with the Bush administration describing the regime as the 'most democratic in the Arab world' while the American Secretary of State, Colin Powell, visiting Algiers briefly in December, praised Algeria's 'exceptional cooperation in the war on terrorism'.

This fulsome support also meant that the Bush administration warmly welcomed Bouteflika's re-election on 9 April 2004, at which the incumbent president supposedly secured 83 per cent of the vote. However, his main challenger, Ali Benflis – the prime minister from 2000 until Bouteflika replaced him with Ahmed Ouyahia in May 2003, who came second with a distant 8 per cent – derided the election as a sham.⁸⁶ He alleged that there were irregularities

ALGERIA

‘in thousands of polling stations across the country’, and vowed to appeal to the Constitutional Council which validates results. In the same vein Abdel Monem Said, director of the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, said he found such a landslide deeply worrying, adding: ‘Any president who can win re-election with a score of 83 per cent is a sign that there was a heavy government presence in the voting process.’

The US State Department poured scorn on these claims, saying Bouteflika’s re-election was ‘free from fraud’ and Algeria’s first democratic presidential contest. On 3 July President Bush backed this up with a personal message, declaring: ‘America continues to rely on Algeria as its partner in the fight against terrorism as well as in the crucial role of spreading democracy and promoting prosperity in the world.’ Not to be outdone, President Chirac also congratulated Bouteflika and said the campaign had ‘allowed the Algerian people to show its willingness to move forward on the path of democratic pluralism’. Likewise Anne-Marie Lizin, head of the foreign affairs commission of Belgium’s Senate, stated: ‘We have the feeling of an enormous step forward ... this vote has reached European standards.’⁸⁷

This external legitimacy strengthened Bouteflika’s hand as he continued to preside over changes that were hailed as hopeful in the West, in particular his commitment to clear and transparent government.⁸⁸ Most significantly he made apparent inroads towards making the military accountable to civilian authority as the portly Mohammed Lamari retired in 2004 from his post as de facto defence minister, ostensibly for reasons of ill-health. This was followed by the sidelining of Larbi Belkheir, widely seen as a gamekeeper for the military in his position as head of the president’s office, who was appointed Ambassador to Morocco from 26 August 2005. This left only three supporters of the January 1992 coup still in power – Abdelmalek Guenaizia, the minister delegate for defence, and the two ruthless heads of the intelligence services, Major General

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Mohammed Médiène and Major General Smaïn Lamari – and seemed to signal that Bouteflika had the upper hand over the army.

Away from international politics and away from this court intrigue, the regime still had a fundamental problem of legitimacy amongst the young. With unemployment still endemic the generational divide was as great as ever, especially in Kabylia. The village council movement, still seething with rage, re-started talks with the government in January 2005 but these broke down shortly afterwards. The divide was worsened by the climate of censorship which Bouteflika introduced after his re-election. Editors, journalists and cartoonists critical of the president and his government were ruthlessly repressed. Mohammed Benchicou, the editor of *Le Matin*, was imprisoned in 2004 for attacking Bouteflika in print. In December 2005 Benchicou's sentence was extended by six months and the paper, forced to cease publication, was ordered to pay a fine of 2.5 million dinars. *Le Matin* journalists Sid Ahmed Semiane and Ghada Hamrouche and the daily's cartoonist Ali Dilem were also sentenced to six more months in prison. Equally, Bouteflika kept a tight rein on any form of Islamist dissent. Ali Belhadj was under constant surveillance and in July 2005 he was arrested and imprisoned for seven months for making a statement on Al-Jazeera that praised Iraqi insurgents in their fight against the 'American occupation', shortly after two Algerian diplomats had been kidnapped in Iraq.

Bouteflika clearly wanted to silence debate as he sought to bring final closure to the reconciliation process and in this tense atmosphere a peace charter was put to a referendum on 29 September 2005.⁸⁹ Continuing along the path of the 1999 civil concord, the charter enshrined a broad amnesty for past abuses that covered members of the state security forces and armed groups who were in prison or about to surrender. This supposedly did not extend to those who had committed 'acts of collective massacre, rape, or the use of explosives in public places', but, given the lack of any serious investigation into these crimes, the Algerian public knew that such promises were a

ALGERIA

dead letter. The opposition, led by the FFS, called for a boycott of the referendum on the grounds that the charter glorified force, inscribed immunity from prosecution, negotiated away suffering and represented a denial of truth and justice to hundreds of thousands of victims and their families. Unsurprisingly the state-controlled television and radio gave scant coverage to such criticism, and independent journalists and organizations were intimidated; the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights was prevented from holding public meetings as the government continued to draw upon the state of emergency legislation despite claiming that the war was over.

Officials claimed that the charter was approved by 97 per cent on a turnout of 79 per cent. Independent estimates, however, put the numbers voting in the big cities at some 20–30 per cent lower. *Le Soir d'Algérie* estimated a participation rate of 50 per cent in Sétif whilst in Kabylia polling stations were attacked and ballots destroyed. Undeterred, Bouteflika pressed ahead, and on 1 November 6,778 prisoners were amnestied as the government set about transforming the charter into law. Back on the international stage Bouteflika continued to cultivate strong relations with the West. For example, he attended the G8 summit in Gleneagles at which Tony Blair unveiled a major international initiative to deal with debt relief. This meant that he was in Britain at the time of the 7 July 2005 bombings in London, which were greeted with sighs of 'now you know' by the pro-government Algerian media. 'Londonistan', as one *El-Moudjabid* journalist explained, was finally blowing back in British faces.⁹⁰

During the autumn of 2005 Bouteflika was bedevilled with serious health problems. He was rushed to France for treatment as Algeria became awash with rumours that he was about to die. By the beginning of 2006 he had returned, all smiles, to his position, as the Blair government, determined to crack down on religious extremism but sensitive to the issue of human rights, tried to

THE NEW IMPERIALISM AND THE WAR ON TERROR

conclude an agreement that detainees sent back to Algeria would not be tortured. Talks led to the offer of an official state visit, the first by an Algerian head of state to Britain, which Bouteflika knew would further enhance his external legitimacy. On 11–12 July 2006 he was accorded the full red-carpet treatment. Following an audience with the Queen he had one-to-one talks and lunch with Blair at 10 Downing Street. He also met the Leaders of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and had discussions with the Lord Mayor of London and leading British investment and commercial representatives.

The meeting between Bouteflika and Blair concluded with a joint statement in which the two underlined the growing importance of relations, especially given that Algeria was a key supplier of gas to Europe. Algeria and Britain signed an agreement to establish a Joint Commission with ministerial talks about investment, debt repayment, and trade to be held on an annual basis. Finally and most importantly the two countries agreed to deepen security and judicial cooperation in the fight against terrorism. In practical terms this meant joint military exercises, training visits and weapons sales. It also meant the signing of four legal treaties between Britain and Algeria on Extradition, Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, Judicial Cooperation in Civil and Commercial Matters, and the Re-admission and Circulation of Persons, which theoretically ensured that no detainees would suffer human rights abuses, a commitment further sealed by letters between the president and the prime minister that outlined the precise framework for returning suspects.

Armed with such assurances, Kim Howells, Secretary for State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, deflected questions in the House of Commons about the human rights of individuals deported back to Algeria. Replying to the MP Jeremy Corbyn's concerns, voiced in the Chamber on 13 September 2006, Howells admitted that there was no memorandum of understanding with the Algerian government nor indeed was the government seeking one.

ALGERIA

Nevertheless, he announced:

The government are satisfied that these arrangements and the changing circumstances in Algeria allow the UK to deport individuals in a manner consistent with its domestic and international human rights obligations. The Special Immigration Appeals Commission recently dismissed an appeal against deportation by terrorist suspect 'Y', ruling that he would not face a real risk of inhuman or degrading treatment if he were returned to Algeria. Algeria is a signatory to the United Nations Convention Against Torture.

Howells' replies illustrate just how much the post-11 September and post- 7 July context has transformed attitudes to the Algerian regime. By July 2006 we are light years away from 1998 when the international community, led by the then UK foreign secretary Robin Cook, sought to call the Zeroual regime to account on human rights abuses. Now the criticisms voiced by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are met with a muted response. Why? Because Algeria is a pivot in the 'war on terror' and this turn of events in international relations has allowed the regime to weather the storm for the time being. Bouteflika is officially viewed as a friend in the Muslim world and neither the American or British governments want to pose awkward questions that might destabilize his regime.

AFTERWORD

THE ANGER THAT WILL NOT GO AWAY

ALGERIA 2011. IT is fifty-seven years since the beginning of the war of liberation, forty-nine years since independence and fourteen years since the worst massacres. Bouteflika has been president since April 1999 and his official internet site, www.el-mouradia.dz, projects transparency, modernity and democratic accountability. At the click of a button you can access a biography of the president, pictures of the past heads of state, documents, an historical timeline and Bouteflika's speeches. One can even email the president.

However, this depiction of Algeria as a successful twenty-first-century state evades some awkward questions. The coups of 1965 and 1992 do not merit a mention, and although we are told that Boudiaf was assassinated the details of why and how are omitted. In terms of the violence of the 1990s Algeria is cast as victim, one of the countries that has suffered most from the scourge of terrorism. Nothing is said about the vast human-rights abuses carried out by the forces of law and order.

Now, the website claims, Algeria has shaken off this bloodshed. As a result of Bouteflika's transition process the country is striding forward and is resolutely orientated towards the future. In 2007 there were national elections, the country hosted the ninth All-Africa Games and Algiers was the Arab cultural capital. There is also a

ALGERIA

whole section devoted to Bouteflika's prestige project: the 755-mile 'East-West Motorway'. Being built at a cost of \$11 billion by two construction companies, one Chinese and the other Japanese, this motorway will stretch across the whole country from El Taref on the Tunisian border, through to Tlemcen on the Moroccan border, via Constantine, Bordj Bou Arreridj and Algiers. Designed, too, to link Algeria up with its two North African neighbours, for Bouteflika this motorway is the symbol of a rejuvenated Algeria. Confidence and stability have been restored. Unlike in 1997, Algeria no longer has the hallmarks of a failed state.

This is the official façade: what is the reality? His website might exude confidence but in practice Bouteflika's government, led since June 2008 by Ahmed Ouyahia, is beset by permanent tensions, the first of which is the need to deliver a better economy. In this respect it is important to underline the many positive signs. One only has to walk around the fifteen-storey Business Centre that adjoins the Algiers Hilton Hotel and see the international companies – Michelin, Air France, British Airways, Microsoft, Pfizer – that are now doing business in Algeria: testament that the country is no longer viewed as a high risk in the same way that it was during the 1990s. Moreover Algiers has a huge modern airport, unveiled in July 2006, that rivals any in Europe. Digital terrestrial television has been rolled out across the three national channels. The windfall from the increase in oil prices means that, in theory at least, the government has a huge fiscal reserve to invest in renewing the country's dilapidated roads and railways. The country's first bank, *Crédit Populaire d'Algérie*, has been privatized, and foreign investors are queuing up to get a further share of Algeria's gas riches, the sixth largest in the world.¹ As in much of Africa and the Middle East, there is also a growing Chinese presence which has poured huge amounts of money into building and construction over the last five years.²

Yet, despite these signs, the country remains blighted by

THE ANGER THAT WILL NOT GO AWAY

unemployment, particularly amongst the young. Official statistics in 2006 put the unemployment rate at 13 per cent but this figure is challenged by Louisa Hanoune, leader of the Trotskyist Parti des Travailleurs, who claims that it is 30 per cent.³ Elsewhere *The Economist* advances a figure of 17.3 per cent.⁴ In 2009 government figures claimed that in the preceding nine years unemployment had fallen from 30 per cent to 11.3 per cent. However, even these statistics identified that this unemployment rate was nearly twice as high (21.5 per cent) for fifteen to twenty-nine year olds, meaning that two-thirds of the people looking for work are in this age bracket.⁵

Whichever figure is correct, the truth is that unemployment is the daily backdrop to day-to-day life, which explains why the government is encouraging the younger population to become involved in private enterprise. 'Commerce not politics' is the regime's slogan, and it has introduced a series of schemes to help under-thirties to establish their own businesses, resulting in an explosion of pizzerias, cybercafés and international call centres.⁶ Unemployment is also the reason why the government turns a blind eye not only to the black market but also to clandestine immigration, as thousands try to leave in search of a better economic life, usually in France. It knows that both, by channelling away social discontent, are in effect safety valves for the system.

In the meantime, Bouteflika, mindful of the need for American support to prop up the regime, knows that he must aid the United States in its 'war on terror' despite widespread anger at the war in Iraq. It is a delicate balancing act which has led both governments to be increasingly discreet about the exact nature of their collaboration within the framework of the Pan-Sahel Counter-Terrorist Initiative, set up in 2004. The establishment in 2006 of a new Algerian-US military base at Tamanrasset, the administrative capital of the country's extreme south, was cloaked in secrecy, lest it provoke popular uproar.⁷ However, flight records of planes reveal that two US

ALGERIA

military flights, transporting 100 Special Force personnel and their dogs, landed at the base on 16 February 2006, followed by a third flight, carrying surveillance and listening equipment on the next day. Local people saw these troops travelling overland into northern Mali in search of pro-al-Qaeda Islamist guerrillas reportedly operating across Chad, Niger, Mali and Mauritania. On top of this Algeria continues to develop a civilian nuclear programme as a symbol of its desire to be the major power in North Africa, signing a cooperation agreement with the United States on 9 June 2007.

The continuing importance of the Algerian connection for American foreign policy was made clear in the confidential US diplomatic cables leaked by WikiLeaks from 28 November 2010 onwards. Released in conjunction with the New York Times in the USA, Le Monde in France, Der Spiegel in Germany, El Pais in Spain and The Guardian in the UK, the cables revealed how, despite President Barack Obama's jettisoning of Bush's 'war on terror' language, the Bouteflika regime was still seen as the most important country fighting Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb region. It was the key player in counter-terrorist operations in and around the Sahara and has given vital assistance in the mopping up of several networks that had sent Algerian jihadis to Iraq, although the cables also highlighted tensions. In February 2008 the US Embassy described the Algerian secret services as 'prickly' and 'paranoid', while the Algerian government was angered by the fact that Algerian officials entering the USA had been included on a list for enhanced security screening.

To bolster support and deflect criticism away from his pro-US policy, Bouteflika has been very willing to resort to traditional nationalist discourse attacking the French. In an emotional speech in May 2005, opening an historical conference to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the French repression in Sétif in eastern Algeria, Bouteflika set out to expose the hypocrisy of French liberal values.

THE ANGER THAT WILL NOT GO AWAY

Just at the moment when huge numbers of Algerians were giving their lives in the liberation of Europe from Nazism, he argued, the French were carrying out a massacre of unspeakable horror.⁸ Conveniently forgetting the grave human-rights abuses carried out by the Algerian regime since independence, Bouteflika readily assumed the mantle of victim, attacking France as a country in denial about the colonial past and even making an explicit link between the Holocaust and colonialism. Bouteflika's vitriol was coloured by the Franco-Algerian polemic stirred up by French government legislation in February 2005 which decreed that the colonial mission must be taught in schools in a positive fashion.⁹ His polemic undoubtedly blighted public relations between the two countries, preventing the long-mooted treaty of reconciliation, though behind the scenes they continued to cooperate on economic and security issues. Crucially, however, it allowed Bouteflika, like Boumediène before him, to look strong by standing up to the old colonial power.

Bouteflika was also confronted with power struggles within the regime. In the wake of the 2004 presidential elections he seemed to have the upper hand, but in November 2005 the inner circle of the military, fearful of continuing scares about the president's health, met in secret to discuss the crisis. The Algerian press, tightly controlled and fearful of censorship, said nothing about the event. However, the *Gazette du Maroc* reported that the proceedings were dominated by the heads of the DRS, generals Mohammed Médiène and Smaïn Lamari, who talked about Lakdar Brahimi, presidential candidate in 1999, former foreign-affairs minister and former UN envoy in Afghanistan and Iraq, as Bouteflika's most likely successor.¹⁰ For the veteran human-rights activist Ali-Yahia Abdennour, the meeting illustrated the continuing strength of the DRS:

The DRS has never been as powerful as during Bouteflika's second

ALGERIA

term. Neither he nor the generals dare oppose it. The DRS has six or seven ministers in the government ... and it has placed in each department a colonel whose function is to spy on the minister and his personnel. This system paralyzes the State and deprives its institutions of any authority. The real president is not Bouteflika, it is general Mediène. The youth in Algiers call Bouteflika the ‘president-Taiwan’, in reference to the fake goods that come from South-East Asia. For them, he is the fake president.¹¹

Yet, despite health scares Bouteflika has survived. Indeed, in 2008 he ensured that the constitution was changed so that he could run for a third presidential term. This he duly did on 9 April 2009, winning, according to the government, 90.24 per cent of the vote on the basis of a 74.54 per cent turn-out. His closest rival, Louisa Hanoun, secured just 4.22 per cent. Observers from the African Union, the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference proclaimed the election to be ‘free and transparent’, but the UN monitors refused to support this statement, despite Algerian government pressure to do so. Meanwhile a confidential US Embassy cable dated 13 April 2009 was blunt about the reality:

Opposition parties and defeated candidates have placed the actual turnout figures at between 18 and 55 per cent, while informal Embassy observations indicated that the vast majority of polling stations were empty across the capital, with actual turnout at 25–30 per cent at most.¹²

The cable then went on to assess the election’s consequences, explaining how the UN observers had conveyed their concerns to the UN General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon in a private report. It then concluded that these reservations were illustrative of

THE ANGER THAT WILL NOT GO AWAY

a system in which opposition parties and civil society have their backs against the wall and citizens have little to do with a political process increasingly detached from society. With Bouteflika's hold on power secure, Algeria now faces an urgent need for dialogue between the population and the state, a situation that left UN monitors deeply worried about what comes next.¹³

Behind each of these issues – the economy, US support, the internal power struggles, electoral transparency – the security question looms large. Bouteflika's presidency stands or falls by his ability to bring a final end to the violence, but many believe that the terrorist threat is manipulated by the government to maintain the state of emergency and limit freedom. As one young Algerian, who wished to remain anonymous, claimed, 'They know where the GSPC are. They could finish them off in a week but terrorism is useful because it makes people scared and keeps them down.'¹⁴

On 11 April 2007 a series of coordinated bombs exploded in Algiers, killing at least thirty-three people and wounding more than 222, according to official sources.¹⁵ It was the first time since the late 1990s that the capital had been targeted by such a spate of violence. The symbolic target of the main attack in central Algiers, seemingly carried out by a suicide bomber, was the Prime Minister's office, which was left with a gaping hole in the six-storey building. In the eastern outskirts of the city three car bombs hit a police station in Bab Ezzouar. The attacks, whose media impact across the world was enormous, were immediately claimed by the al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb which posted photographs of the three suicide bombers on the Internet.

For months the Algerian press had been awash with speculation ever since the news, released by videotape on the fifth anniversary of the 11 September attacks, that Al Qaeda's second in command, Ayman Al Zawahiri, had recruited the GSPC as the group's North

ALGERIA

African emissary. In January 2007 the GSPC officially changed its name to the al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb, a recognition of the recruiting power of the al-Qaeda brand name. The 11 April attacks were the most powerful expression of a climate of violence that had been palpable for months. On 30 October 2006, for example, two booby-trap bombs had killed three and wounded twenty-four in the suburbs of Algiers. On 10 December a bus carrying workers for the US company Halliburton was attacked. The US and British media had already picked up on this, pondering for some time whether Algeria and North Africa represented a new front for al-Qaeda.¹⁶ However, with the exception of Simon Tisdale at the Guardian, journalists accepted such stories as a given, without considering how the Algerian government might be exploiting the al-Qaeda threat to muffle criticism and enlist international support.¹⁷

The bombs underlined Algeria's fragility. As *Le Monde's* editorial the following day emphasized, Bouteflika might not be directly responsible for the outrage but, by failing to provide real hope for the young and installing a pseudo-democracy, he, like many other leaders in the Arab world, has provided a pretext for such violence.¹⁸ By pointing the finger at Bouteflika, *Le Monde* drew attention to the unstable pillars of the regime. His transition process might have promised to turn the page but in reality it has generated huge anger. Although the regime has offered compensation to the families of the disappeared, has closed down counter-insurgency centres such as the one at Blida, and has enshrined a law making it impossible to prosecute the forces of law and order for human rights abuses, in the long term such official amnesia is unsustainable.¹⁹ The family of one of the murdered monks, Father Christophe Lebreton, is trying to bring a legal action against the Algerian government through the French courts, and there is continued pressure from international human-rights groups. Amnesty International has closely monitored the case of the two Algerians detainees, 'Q' and

THE ANGER THAT WILL NOT GO AWAY

'K', who were deported by Britain back to Algeria in January 2007 on the grounds that they were a threat to national security. Despite guarantees given by Bouteflika during his official visit to Britain in July 2006, Amnesty claims that both were immediately picked up by the DRS in Algiers. Scrutiny of this nature, in conjunction with the arrest and trial of former leaders such as General Pinochet and Slobodan Milošević, means that many generals, whether still serving or retired, fear that they could be prosecuted outside the country for atrocities committed inside Algeria, and there are persistent rumours that they are seeking immunity from prosecution.²⁰

There is also anger at the authoritarian nature of the Bouteflika regime. As one young Algerian said: 'Bouteflika wants to die as president.' The political cartoonist Ali Dilem has been constantly harassed because his images, testament to the subversive power of humour, mock the president and the regime. One cartoon, published in *Le Matin* on 8 September 2003, depicted the president being chased by an angry Algerian population with the caption 'Bouteflika we are all behind you'; in conjunction with a series, published in *Liberté* in October and November 2003, that cast him as a puppet of the generals, this led to a one-year prison sentence for Dilem and a fine of 50,000 dinars (500 euros).

However, what fuels this anger more than anything else is generalized economic disaffection. Algerians feel angry and frustrated because the system offers no future. The wealth that flows from the oil and gas reserves, and the continuing demand from foreign companies to exploit these resources, mean the regime can disregard the wishes of the vast majority of Algerian citizens. With no need to tax them to raise revenue it has no financial incentive to enter into a genuine political and social relationship with the population. For this reason Algerians in general and the young in particular feel politically, socially and economically dispossessed. 'Hogra', 'humiliation', is the keyword that still sums up the existence

ALGERIA

of millions of Algerians. As one contemporary joke puts it: 'Is there such a thing as hope in Algeria? Yes, a visa. In Algeria, hope is called a visa.'

In 1989 this anger was channelled by the FIS. To vote for the FIS was a way of expressing disaffection with the system. Significantly though, much of the FIS language evoked the sharply polarized categories of the wartime FLN. During the war of liberation the FLN had presented the anti-colonial struggle as a battle of opposites. Justice and injustice; brothers and enemies; coloniser and colonised: the FLN categorized the world into sharply divided choices, a logic of violence that was powerfully expressed by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. In the early 1990s the FIS took over this rhetoric and transformed it into a self-righteous anger of the dispossessed. This was the key to their electoral success, and it highlighted one of the major problems of the post-independence era, namely the preponderance of a political culture that cannot imagine dialogue, pluralism or constructive dissent.

The anger that produced the FIS is still there. Now, however, this alienation does not express itself through organized politics but by hostility to the electoral process which is widely perceived as a sham. The legislative elections on 17 May 2007, which saw the victory of the ruling coalition FLN, RND and MSP under the banner of Presidential Alliance, were marked by huge abstention. Only 35 per cent of the electorate turned out to vote, the lowest number of any election since the establishment of multi-party politics in 1989, and this despite calls by the government to vote as a way of rejecting al-Qaeda. The Minister of the Interior, Yazid Zerhouni, tried to put a brave face on the results, even claiming that there was no reason to be 'ashamed', but in reality the turn-out was a damning verdict on a political system that in the eyes of large parts of the population is riddled with corruption.²¹ There was also widespread resentment at the way in which the threat of al-Qaeda was exploited

THE ANGER THAT WILL NOT GO AWAY

to pressurise Algerians into voting. As Selim Khayami, editor of the daily *Quotidien d'Oran*, argued: 'Not voting does not mean that we are in favour of Al-Qaeda. This blackmail is unacceptable. We reject terrorism unambiguously. Nevertheless that does not solve the crisis of political representation in Algeria.'²²

If voting apathy is one expression of anger at the system, the other is directionless violence and juvenile delinquency. Throughout Algeria riots, largely unreported by the press, take place on a regular basis, often as many as five a week. As the daily *Liberté* reported in September 2006, in a fascinating exploration of youth attitudes in Bab el-Oued in Algiers entitled 'Being twenty in Algeria', these riots are a telling comment on the lack of a civil society.²³ Instead there is a wall of incomprehension between the government and the young, as the latter finds solace in a burgeoning street culture of break-dancing, capoeira and rapping, as well as a new world of cybercafés, internet chatrooms, text messaging, Facebook and Twitter. This generation also expresses a strong distrust of official history. Disappointed by the post-independence state, many believe that the war of liberation was in vain and that the revolution has been betrayed. As one schoolboy puts it provocatively: 'The Algerian War is a tissue of lies.'²⁴ Many feel that the regime has sold the country out to US imperialism, and this is why football crowds chant bin Laden's name. They know that this is a provocation which will inspire fear in the West.

Since the beginning of January 2011 this anger has taken an even more confrontational turn, partly out of anger at increases in the prices of basic food stuffs such as olive oil and sugar, but also because young Algerians have been inspired by events in Tunisia. The trigger for the Tunisian Revolution was the twenty-six-year-old street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi who sold fruit and vegetables illegally in Sidi Bouzid because he could not find a job. When, on 17 December 2010 the police confiscated his produce because he

ALGERIA

did not have a permit, he doused himself in petrol and set fire to himself: an action symbolizing his anger at a system that was offering him, a university graduate, no hope. Bouazizi died on 4 January 2011 and within Algeria, many Algerians, following the events in the press and on the internet, identified with his humiliation. This is why on the evening of 5 January, a few hours after Bouazizi's funeral, rioting broke in Fouka, a town near to Algiers. Groups of young people, male for the most part, threw stones and Molotov cocktails at the police and attacked public buildings identified with the regime. On 6 January this rioting extended to Bab El-Oued, in central Algiers, and Annaba, Blida, Sétif and Oran. After four days of violence five demonstrators had been killed and hundreds more injured. Elsewhere there have been incidents of young Algerians following Bouazizi's example and setting fire to themselves, while on 22 January hundreds of demonstrators in central Algiers, some draped in Tunisian flags, called for greater democracy and were met with police violence.

With the overthrow of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and the subsequent mass demonstrations in Egypt, the Algerian authorities are undoubtedly nervous. They are well aware that of the huge current of disaffection within Algerian society. In an effort to appease this discontent Bouteflika has been conciliatory. He has talked about ending the 'state of emergency', still in place after nearly twenty years, in the near future. He also underlined the need to create more job opportunities and give greater television and radio coverage to opposition parties. However, whether these measures will be enough to satisfy popular aspirations remains an open question.

In 1952 the French demographer, Alfred Sauvy, in a seminal article in the left-wing magazine *L'Observateur*, coined the term 'Third World'.²⁵ Drawing an explicit comparison not only with the two-bloc politics of the Cold War but also with the role of

THE ANGER THAT WILL NOT GO AWAY

the third estate during the French Revolution, Sauvy wanted to convey the colossal transformation represented by decolonization. For Sauvy this was the most significant revolution of the twentieth century: the arrival of Africa, Asia and Latin America as actors on the international stage. The key question then was: what did these countries and populations aspire to?

After independence Algeria was in the vanguard of the third-world movement. Algerians had brought an end to colonial oppression and won their right to self-determination. Yet by the 1980s the new post-colonial generation was being humiliated by a post-colonial regime presiding over endemic corruption and a failing economy. These contradictions produced the riots of October 1988, the pivotal event in post-independence Algeria, and twenty-three years on the same problems are still there. Ordinary Algerians still feel humiliated. They still want to be treated as citizens. They still want good government, the rule of law and use of the oil and gas wealth for the benefit of the majority, not the minority.

Ever a tireless opponent of the regime, the dissident historian Mohammed Harbi sees this as the fundamental model of Algerian politics. To understand Algeria today, he explains, you must start with the massive exclusion of people from power, the rejection of pluralism and the absence of any long-term meaningful political blueprint from the political elite. For this reason he is pessimistic about the future:

The regime has stabilized and with United States support they can do what they want. They are untouchable. But the regime has nothing to offer for the long term. It is not interested in asking where Algeria and Algerians will be in twenty years' time.²⁶

Of course, Harbi's remarks could apply to a whole host of countries, especially given that Algeria is strategically positioned at the tip of

ALGERIA

the arc of insecurity stretching from Morocco through Africa and the Middle East to Pakistan and Indonesia. Living under regimes characterized by corruption and poor government, hundreds of millions of people feel downtrodden at home and ignored by the West, which is only too willing to turn a blind eye on the grounds of strategic interests.

For this reason Sauvy's question is just as relevant at the beginning of the twenty-first century. What these populations aspire to and how they perceive the West is the major issue in international politics, because the brutal truth is that the anger of the post-colonial dispossessed will not go away. This is a fury that has the potential to endure for decades to come.

NOTES

The New Imperialism and the War on Terror

1. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2000. See also his article 'The new Great Game – the battle for Central Asia's oil', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 April 1997.
2. For example, 3,000 import-export companies were set up post-1994.
3. Reda Hassaine, 'Undercover Agent', *Sunday Times*, 17 July 2005.
4. The failed attack on 26 February 1993 was carried out by a small group proclaiming itself to be the 'Liberation Army, Fifth Battalion'. On this see Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*, New York: Penguin, 2004, pp. 249–51.
5. On this see Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 258.
6. In 1996 Algeria signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with China, and the country now has two experimental reactors. The United States has closely monitored the situation and under pressure from the United States the Algerian government accepted International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards in February 1992. Algeria signed up to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in January 1995 and is regularly inspected by the IAEA.
7. On this see Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria*, p. 239.
8. On the Oujda clan see Chapter 3.
9. This was sent to President Chadli on 29 October 1988; the other signatories included three senior FLN wartime leaders, Lakhdar Ben Tobbal, Tahar Zbiri and Mohammedi Said and other prominent former ministers such as Belaid Abdesselam. The declaration called for democracy, the convening of a national conference to elaborate the necessary programme of political reform in a consensual manner, and the postponement of the scheduled presidential election until new democratic rules were agreed.
10. M. Bh, 'Nezzar conteste Bouteflika', *El Watan*, 16 September 1998.
11. Khaled Nezzar, 'Nezzar répond à Benbaïbèche', *Le Matin*, 11 January 1999.
12. The daily *El Watan* was not convinced by these assurances and on 9 February 1999 published a cartoon of a handcuffed ballot box.
13. The law excluded all those born before 1942 who did not participate in the war of liberation. In effect this was a subtle way of bolstering Bouteflika's campaign since

NOTES

- Nahnah could have taken votes away from him.
14. In some barracks the only voting slip available was for Bouteflika and there were no independent observers present. Aït Ahmed suffered a heart attack towards the end of the campaign and was flown to Switzerland for treatment. He had intended to return for polling day but given the circumstances did not.
 15. Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria*, p. 273.
 16. Some parts of the military began to wonder whether, like Boudiaf, Bouteflika would have to be 'reined in'.
 17. Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria*, p. 283.
 18. In Sudan in 1994 the GIA had repelled advances from bin Laden on the grounds that he was not pious enough.
 19. Burke, *Al-Qaeda*. As such Algeria is a perfect example of the way in which bin Laden fed off specific national struggles to develop an international network of affiliated groups.
 20. Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, p. 208. The initiative came from Ressay who went to bin Laden's intermediaries for money.
 21. On this see Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, pp. 198–212.
 22. The violence in Algeria led to a growing number of asylum seekers. Many looked for asylum not just in France but also Britain, Canada, Germany and America as the Algerian diaspora was dispersed across the globe.
 23. Mezraq kept his fortune and was seen parading around in a brand new Mercedes. In 2002 he called on people to vote for the FLN.
 24. 'Islamic Guerrilla Emir keeps low profile', *Algeria Interface*, 10 February 2000.
 25. *Ibid.*
 26. On 13 April 2000 *El Watan* claimed that a large number of the founder members were ex-FIS. This was vehemently denied by Wafa leaders.
 27. On this theme see the *History Today* series entitled 'Coming to Terms With the Past' which began in November 2003. See specifically Rachel Seider on Guatemala.
 28. Quoted in 'In the steps of Augustine', *30 Days* magazine, No. 1, Rome, 2001.
 29. For example, acute housing shortages meant that journalists in state television and radio could easily be bought off, since they did not want to face the sack and loss of their livelihood by asking difficult questions.
 30. On Louisa Hanoune see Louisa Hanoune, *Une Autre Voix pour l'Algérie: Entretiens avec Ghania Mouffouk*, Paris: La Découverte, 1996.
 31. On the debate about the precise figures of the number of disappeared see Habib Souaïdia, *Le Procès de la 'Sale Guerre'*, pp. 175–87. See also '1000 cas de disparitions forcées', www.algeria.watch.org/mrv/2002/1000_disparitions_A.htm.
 32. La Découverte was previously known as Maspero; during the Algerian War it published Maurice Maschino, *Le Refus*, Paris: Maspero, 1960, and Jacques Vergès, Mourad Oussedik and Abdessamed Benabdallah, *Nuremberg pour l'Algérie*, Paris: Maspero, 1961.
 33. Anour Benmalek, *Les Amants Désunis*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1998 (translated as *The Lovers of Algeria*, London: Harvill, 2001); Aziz Chouaki, *L'Etoile d'Alger*, Paris: Balland, 2002 (translated as *The Star of Algiers*, London: Serpent's Tail, 2005); Boualem Sansal, *Le Serment des Barbares*, Paris: Gallimard, 1999. See also novels written under the pseudonym Yasmina Khadra.
 34. Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation*, London: Fourth Estate, 2005, pp. 631–719.
 35. On 1 August 2001 Al-Jazeera included a lengthy interview with Mohammed Samraoui, the former colonel in the DRS, who reiterated his accusation that Boudiaf

NOTES

- was assassinated by insiders in the regime.
36. On this see Hugh Miles, *Al-Jazeera*, London: Abacus, 2005, pp. 59-60.
 37. For example, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have expressed grave reservations about the transition process on the grounds that human rights abuses have not been investigated.
 38. Y.B. and Samy Mouhoubi, 'Algérie: un colonel dissident accuse', *Le Monde*, 27 November 1999, pp. 14-15.
 39. On this see José Garçon, 'Maol, un bug dans l'armée algérienne', *Libération*, 17 May 2001. By May 2001 the MAOL site had received 720,000 hits.
 40. *Le Figaro*, 15 June 2000.
 41. Bouteflika interviewed on the radio station Europe 1, 7 November 1999.
 42. Salima Tlemçani, 'Les jeunes contre la grâce amnistiante', *El Watan*, 14 April 2001.
 43. For example, many Algerians were disgusted by the argument in the new National Assembly about salaries for its members. The argument reinforced the image that all politicians were in politics for the money and personal enrichment.
 44. On this see Reporters sans Frontières, *Algérie: Le Livre Noir*.
 45. Most had access to only 75 litres of water a day, often very polluted, when double that was required to meet minimum needs. Homes and businesses kept water in cans, buckets and saucepans.
 46. On this see *Une Population Précarisée*, a report for Fédération des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme by Sophie Bessis, Smaïl Goumeziane and Ahmed Dahmani, November 2001. Extracts of the report are reproduced in *Algérie: Le Livre Noir*, pp. 177-202.
 47. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) report, as well as a country profile of Algeria, can be accessed at www.unicef.org. The website also contains a detailed report from October 2003 on how Algerian children have been coping with the impact of the violence entitled 'Psychological rehabilitation of children traumatized by terrorist violence'.
 48. 'Pourquoi les Algériens se suicident?', *Liberté*, 18 July 2002. On the phenomenon of youth suicide see also Sid Ahmed Semiane, 'La mort au bout du suicide', *Le Matin*, 17 January 2002. In the article Sid Ahmed Semiane talks about the case of a young man who had set fire to himself in broad daylight. In the letter explaining to his family why he simply wrote: 'No jobs, no housing, no hope. Goodbye and long live Algeria.'
 49. Sid Ahmed Semiane, 'La main de Dieu à Bab el-Oued', *Le Matin*, 12 November 2001.
 50. T.B., 'Visite tardive', *El Watan*, 13 November 2001.
 51. *Le Monde*, 12 November 2001.
 52. Asked by a housing association leader if people would have to riot to underline their need for help, the interior minister, Yazid Zerhouni, said, 'You will have neither tent nor any help ... if you want to demonstrate, do so and you'll see.' The CD *Abdelkader* by Faudel, Khaled and Taha was a track take from their CD 1,2,3 *Soleils - Taha, Khaled, Faudel in Concert*, 2000. This was a live recording of their concert at the Bercy Stadium in Paris on 26 September 1998.
 53. Taken from their debut CD *Intik*, released on Sony in 2000.
 54. The young had nothing but contempt for the RCD. They saw it treating Kabylia as a fiefdom with which to do deals with the government.
 55. Reporters sans Frontières, *Algérie: Le Livre Noir*, p. 138.
 56. The rioting was not directionless. Smaïl Mira's house was attacked because as the

NOTES

- head of the local anti-terrorist militia he had used his position as a front for extortion and racketeering.
57. Reporters sans Frontières, *Algérie: Le Livre Noir*, p. 127.
 58. Ibid.
 59. A. Samil, 'Le message', *El Watan*, 14 June 2001.
 60. He had been promised unprecedented access to government records by Bouteflika but the DRS did not cooperate with the commission, some indication of tensions at the top.
 61. José Garçon, 'Trois manifestants tués en Kabylie', *Libération*, 26 April 2001. The International Crisis Group (ICG) argued that the young were animated by despair and anger. On this see the ICG report 'Algeria: Anger and Unrest in Kabylie', June 2003, which can be accessed at www.crisisgroup.org.
 62. In 1997 Hanoune's Trotskyites won four seats. Like Djaballah, Hanoune also signed the Rome platform which major opposition parties drew up in 1995 calling for a negotiated solution to the conflict. But with the main architect on the Algerian side of the Rome platform, Hocine Aït Ahmed's FFS, not participating in the election and with Bouteflika trying to promote his own version of national reconciliation it has been suggested the regime was happy to see Hanoune being given the ostensible leadership of the regime's democratic critics at the expense of Aït Ahmed. The village councils used intimidation to stop people voting.
 63. On this see Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria*.
 64. Claire Tréan, 'Un général algérien et la justice française', *Le Monde*, 26 April 2001.
 65. Preface to Souaïdia, *La Sale Guerre*.
 66. Interviewed by Martin Evans, Paris, 23 May 2003.
 67. Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria*.
 68. The programme Droit d'Auteurs was a special edition about Algeria.
 69. Quoted in Souaïdia, *Le Procès de la 'Sale Guerre'*, p. 20.
 70. Ibid., p. 61.
 71. Ibid., pp. 210–13.
 72. Ibid., p. 266.
 73. Ibid., p. 144.
 74. Ibid., p. 241.
 75. *New York Times*, 11 February 2004.
 76. Disciples included Zacarias Moussaoui, a French citizen of Moroccan descent,
 77. who was involved in the 11 September 2001 attacks. On this see the account by his brother Abd Samad Moussaoui, *Zacarias Moussaoui, Mon Frère*, Paris: Denoël, 2002. See also Frédéric Chambon, 'La part d'ombre de Zacarias Moussaoui', *Le Monde*, 30 March 2002. Quoted in 'Ricin jurors attack new terror laws', *Observer*, 9 October 2005.
 78. This was underlined by the case of Lotfi Raissi, who had always wanted to be a pilot
 79. and left his family home in Algeria to pursue his dream in the United States. Twelve days after the attacks on New York and Washington he was accused of plotting the 9/11 attacks and interned in London's Belmarsh prison. Five months later the case against Raissi collapsed and he was released but is still battling to clear his name. Beghal was extradited to France from the United Arab Emirates in late September 2001 after he told police in the Gulf state that he had helped plan a foiled suicide
 80. attack on the American Embassy just off the Champs Elysées. He later retracted his statement, saying that he had confessed under 'methodical torture'.
 - 81 *Al-Hayat*, January 2004.

NOTES

82. Selima Mellah and Jean-Baptiste Rivoire, 'Enquete sur l'étrange <<Ben Laden du Sahara>>', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 4 February 2005.
83. Ibid.
84. The tenth and eleventh stages of the event were cancelled at the time for 'security reasons'. The leading French driver, Stéphane Peterhansel, and the Spanish motorcyclist Nani Roma were among those targeted.
85. If his links to bin Laden were as strong as Algeria claimed, it is curious that American authorities did not request his extradition. Suspicion over El-Para's status was heightened further when he was convicted on terrorism charges on 25 June 2005, and sentenced to death at the end of a trial that was held formally in his absence even though he had been back in the country for more than six months. 'This is the first time in the annals of Algerian justice that an accused person has been condemned in his absence when the authorities say that he is in the hands of the police,' *Liberté* newspaper commented.
86. The Islamic candidate Abdallah Djaballah won slightly less than 5 per cent of the vote. The others, each gaining less than 2 per cent, were Said Sadi, whose base was in the ethnic Berber region east of Algiers, Louise Hanoune, the Trotskyist, and Ali Faouzi Rebaine, a little-known politician from the tiny Algeria of Patriots Party. Minister Ahmed Ouyahia, Bouteflika's top ally, claimed that the military had kept
87. its promise not to interfere. 'This is proof of a new democratic maturity.' The Army had allowed soldiers to vote for the first time at regular polling stations and not their barracks, a move seen as curbing military influence over the outcome. Algeria is one of the leading countries, along with Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal and
88. South Africa, behind a pan-African initiative, New Partnership for African Development (Nepad), to monitor corruption and encourage good governance. The initiative was launched by the Organization for African Unity in July 2001. On this see www.nepad.org.
During the referendum fifty people were killed.
89. Conversation with Martin Evans, Lyon, 23 June 2006.
- 90.

Afterword: The Anger That Will Not Go Away

1. On this see *The Economist: The World in 2007*, 2007.
2. On the growing role of China in Algeria see Ali Bisri, 'Chinatown couscous', *Afrique-Asie*, February 2007.
3. Lahouari Addi, 'En Algérie, du conflit armé à la violence sociale', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 2006.
4. Xan Smiley, 'Algeria Forecast', *The Economist: The World in 2007*, 2007.
5. Dominique Lagarde and Anis Allik, 'Maghreb: la jeunesse contre le pouvoir',
6. *L'Express*, 12 January 2011.
Lahouari Addi, 'En Algérie, du conflit armé à la violence sociale'.
7. On this see Jeremy Keenan, 'A sift through the sand reveals no grain of truth', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 15 December 2006.
8. Bouteflika's speech can be found at www.algeria-watch.org.
9. Dozens of historians signed a petition opposing the law led by Claude Liauzu, emeritus professor at Paris VII and a distinguished specialist of colonialism.
10. On this see Lahouari Addi, 'En Algérie, du conflit armé à la violence sociale'.
11. Quoted by Lahouari Addi, 'En Algérie, du conflit armé à la violence sociale'.

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12. US Embassy Cable, 'Bouteflika re-elected in heavily managed contest', 13 April 2009, WikiLeaks, <http://213.251.145.96/Cable/2009/04/09ALGIERS>.
13. Ibid.
14. Interview with Martin Evans, Paris, 9 March 2007.
15. Piotr Smolar, 'Al-Qaida démontre son implantation dans les pays du Maghreb', *Le Monde*, 16 April 2007.
16. On this see Jeremy Keenan, 'A sift through the sand reveals no grain of truth'.
17. Simon Tisdale, 'Fears grow of a radical Islamist Maghreb', *Guardian*, 14 February 2007.
18. Editorial, 'Al-Qaida à Alger', *Le Monde*, 13 April 2007.
19. Even in Spain the 'pact of silence' has not endured, with the generations of grandsons and granddaughters of the civil war generation now wanting truth and justice. On this see Giles Tremlett, *Ghosts of Spain: Travels Through a Country's Hidden Past*, London: Faber and Faber, 2007.
20. See *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment*, March 2004, which reported that in talks with France Algeria agreed to give ground on the Western Sahara issue: 'In compensation, France will guarantee that Algeria's generals do not face prosecution before the International Criminal Court or other European tribunals for crimes committed during the civil war.' *Middle East Online* of 19 December 2005 quoted an NGO report saying 'a strong rumour in Algeria says there has been a pact between the generals and the presidency: the former will withdraw from power in exchange for impunity from crimes committed by the army during the Sale Guerre; it says that the generals are haunted by the threat of having to appear before a national or international court of justice, particularly over the issue of the "disappeared". The condemnation to death of Fouad Boulema, for alleged participation in the major massacres of Rais and Bentalha, is seen by some as the beginning of the whitewashing of the army, which has been accused of complicity in the massacres.'
21. The main opposition party, the FFS, boycotted the elections, while the al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb called on Algerians not to vote. In terms of results the FLN lost its overall majority, falling from 199 to 136 deputies. However, this was compensated by the progress of the other two parties in the ruling coalition as the RND gained 61 seats and the MSP 52.
22. Quoted by Florence Beaugé, 'La menace terroriste n'a pas pesé sur la campagne électorale en Algérie', *Le Monde*, 18 May 2007.
23. Mustapha Benfodil, 'Politique, sexe, Internet, violence, portable, visa, Nasrallah ... Avoir 20 ans en Algérie', *Liberté*, 5 September 2006.
24. Ibid.
25. Alfred Sauvy, 'Trois mondes, une planète', *L'Observateur*, August 1952.
26. Interview with Martin Evans, Paris, 9 March 2007.

VICTORIA CLARK



'A clear, immensely absorbing introduction to Yemen's complicated history and opaque politics' —Owen Bennett-Jones, BBC World Service

YEMEN

DANCING ON THE HEADS OF SNAKES

CHAPTER NINE

CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

PAYING FOR POWER

‘I look at this country, and I see a plane ready to take off!’

‘In what direction?’

‘I can see you don’t believe me,’ said Faris al-Sanabani, pausing for another forkful of steak, ‘But we have everything in Yemen!’

The president’s smart public relations supremo, who doubled up as a wealthy businessman with his own security company and English-language newspaper, knew at least as well as I did that Yemen had almost nothing, that its oil and water were running out, that jihadism was on the rise, that corruption was endemic, southern secessionism à la mode and, at the time, a fifth Saada war was in the offing. Equally, we were both aware that the rule of law was a distant dream, the population exploding, unemployment running at 40 per cent and the president spending billions Yemen could not spare on Russian fighter planes.

It was March 2008 and only the previous evening a western diplomat had told me that, at a recent gathering of his counterparts from other western embassies, all had agreed that Salih’s removal from power was

CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

vital if Yemen was to avoid disintegration. But even with him gone, the diplomat had confided, not one of them had been able to suggest a plan to reverse the country's decline. 'Of course we'd start by raiding the president's foreign bank accounts for a few billion dollars, but that wouldn't stop the rot,' he had said.

There was clearly no question of Yemen being about to 'take off', although from where al-Sanabani and I were sitting, dining off steak and chips in a fashionable restaurant in Hadda, a southern suburb of Sanaa, it was hard to believe the outlook was all gloomy. We were surrounded by unveiled, wealthy women from the Gulf States and foreign businessmen; the lighting was low, the air-conditioning soothing, the service attentive. Looking around me in that oasis of luxury, I might almost have swallowed al-Sanabani's ludicrous line if I had never seen the dreary destitution of towns like Mocha or Marib, or the squalor of ancient Zabid, if I had not met women who had been married off at the age of nine, if I had not known that a city as vast as Taiz had no mains water supply for weeks on end, or that so much of rural Yemen remained without electricity or that around half the population could not read. I dreaded to think what the camps filled with people fleeing the on-off war in Saada were like, what out-of-bounds Saada itself looked like.

A mere twenty-minute drive from old Sanaa to wealthy Hadda is a journey from the third world to the first. Hadda's clean, quiet avenues were lined with glamorous eateries and the fortress palaces of the rich and influential concealed behind high blank walls and iron gates, and protected by armed guards. I had visited a few of them. A former prime minister's home boasted a basement library and a reception room the size of a hotel conference hall. While lunching at the palatial residence of a member of Yemen's upper chamber of parliament, I had learned that the second power in the land, Brigadier-General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, occupied a neighbouring mansion. Another gigantic marble-floored palace, the home of a former minister of transport, had a swimming pool and tennis court. The al-Ahmar clan's stronghold

YEMEN

in the capital, a cluster of high-rises in Hadda, was located not far from the American and British embassies with their anti-al-Qaeda fortifications. Al-Sanabani himself was proud to have built his own brand new home in Hadda of stone quarried from a whole mountain he had purchased near Marib, rather than from cement, and to have employed a skilled craftsman to create traditional stained glass and alabaster windows for him. In the main, however, the wealthy of Hadda seemed to have looked to the architecture of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States for inspiration, rather than to Yemen's famously decorative native style.

In old Sanaa it is much easier to believe oneself in the remote and mysterious heart of Arabia, in a place with a claim to being the longest continuously inhabited city on earth, founded by one of Noah's sons and visited by the Prophet's father and son-in-law. Residing in one of the hundreds of high-rise fortresses fashioned of stone and brick with decorative frostings of white plaster-work around stained-glass half-moon windows, with uneven floors and steeply winding central staircases wafted by burning incense, one experiences a style of Yemeni life far more compellingly attractive than anything on offer in Hadda. In Hadda there are no sturdy, prettily patterned minarets greeting God's new day with a crackle of amplified electronic feedback, before their muezzins' preparatory coughs give way to the shattering surround-sound of the call to prayer. The rich of Hadda are too distant from the old city to enjoy the full effect of those competing wails mounting to heaven like the cries of hundreds of prisoners in an overcrowded dungeon, ricocheting off the nearby mountains and then fading to a sporadic grumble as more workaday noises start up in the narrow alleyways: the roar of engines and the braying of donkeys, the banging on old wooden doors and shrieking from high windows, all the sounds and stinks of the souk.

Barring a few restaurants, Hadda after nightfall is silent and dark, while old Sanaa is at its most seductive, the coloured half-moon windows of its high-rise palaces aglow with jewel light. After

CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

ruminating the afternoon away in their above-ground-level niches, on rolled carpets or battered car seats, with their qat and their bottled water and their cigarettes, the merchants and carpenters and blacksmiths in the souk are back in business. Each dimly gas-lit niche and cupboard shop is like a window opened in an advent calendar and, in the low glow of hissing paraffin lamps, a row of crouching qat sellers resembles a group of priests engaged in some mysterious pagan rite. Men returning from the *hammam* with towels slung over their shoulders and a group of their elders lounging companionably on the steps of a mosque suggest the closest kind of community life, as does the fact that if one has visited old Sanaa more than once one is guaranteed to be recognised and greeted, as if one has never left. ‘You are welcome’ and ‘I love you’ shout the children in the only English they know. More than anywhere else in Yemen, old Sanaa has the power to persuade one that 9/11, Osama bin Laden and the global ‘war on terror’ are just sad, bad figments of the western imagination.

Our first-world Hadda surroundings and even the excellent steak were not improving al-Sanabani’s spirits. He began railing against Yemen’s mulish parliament; if the jet plane of Yemen was taking its time achieving lift-off, if the material gap between Hadda and the rest of Sanaa, old and new, was showing no sign of narrowing that was because, in al-Sanabani’s opinion, the ignorant tribesmen who accounted for the bulk of Yemen’s MPs were refusing to let the government speculate to accumulate by building a duty-free port at the Bab al-Mandab for example, or a new pipeline and refinery at Mukalla, or a big duty-free port north of Hodeidah, near the Saudi border. Al-Sanabani grabbed a paper napkin and impatiently scribbled a rough map of Yemen with some pipelines and percentages for me. It was really so simple, he said. Actually, he could not see any point in Yemen having a parliament. ‘What we need here right now is a dictatorship, not democracy,’ he told me, ‘Carrots and sticks is what it takes. We should just leave people as they are – illiterate and without electricity – they’ve been that way for hundreds of years, after all – and just get in the investment from outside

YEMEN

and make a start on these big projects. That's the way to get jobs and growth –' He stopped short, belatedly aware of the damage his cynicism was doing to his cause.

American-educated, impatient with his president's costly and time-consuming dancing on snakes' heads that often looked to him like a failure of a will to rule, he was tired and out of sorts. A young friend of his, a deputy of minister of international financial relations named Jalal al-Yaqoub, might be better placed to convince me of Yemen's economic potential, he said. A few days later al-Yaqoub and I duly met, again in Hadda, in another fashionable establishment called The Coffee Trader, at an hour of the afternoon when most Yemenis were lounging at home consuming qat. The American-run café with its authentic Yemeni coffee, Wifi connection and pleasant courtyard garden was as outlandishly first world as the steak restaurant al-Sanabani had taken me to. A threesome of veiled teenage girls sat hunched and giggling over a single laptop. A few young men, dressed in jeans and T-shirts lolled in their chairs, idly scrolling up and down their screens.

In spite of a first, brave assertion that he was 'tired of whining about how bad things are', al-Yaqoub turned out to be far less persuaded of Yemen's chances of pulling off an economic miracle than al-Sanabani had hoped. After a promisingly enthusiastic start – he and Ahmad, the eldest son of the president, were about to embark on an urgent mission to the US and Europe in search of skilled and educated compatriots who could be persuaded to return home to jobs in the higher echelons of the civil service and government – he slowly succumbed to gloom. It transpired that the proposed bait for these young ex-pats – essentially, 'your country needs you' – was highly unlikely to do the trick, given the level of remuneration on offer to those they would be relying on to carry out their commands. As a US-educated deputy minister, al-Yaqoub himself was guaranteed a basic monthly salary of only \$250. 'You can see now why no one with any talent wants a job in the civil service,' he grumbled.

Al-Yaqoub repeated what I had heard many times, that no matter how well-intentioned, western-educated or even well-paid

CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

government ministers were, they soon discovered there was no efficiently working structure in place to implement their directives, that any lever they tried to pull would simply come off in their hands. He explained to me that the true function of the bloated civil service was not to act as an efficient machine in the service of the government but simply as a social safety net. Employees were assured of small but secure salaries in return for doing almost nothing except voting GPC when general election time came around, and for Salih as president whenever given the chance. Naturally enough, the inadequacy of their tiny salaries had led to endemic corruption; one could not procure a sick note, a passport, a job, or permission to build, for example, without bribing a civil servant. The judiciary branch of the civil service was described by 64 per cent of people polled in 2006 as the most bribe-ridden sector of public life, with cases of judges ruling in favour of whichever party offered the largest bribe.¹ Corruption meant that discontent with Salih's regime was growing, not just in a south nostalgic for British and even Marxist law and order, or in remote and poor Saada, but everywhere.

What al-Yaqoub was saying about the dysfunctional civil service reminded me of what Abdul Qadr Bajammal, Yemen's prime minister between 2001 and 2007, had told me about really only putting in three hours work a day while in office. Other state employees I had met had similar tales to tell of chronic underemployment. A former headmaster confided to me that he had quit his job in disgust on discovering he was powerless to sack the quarter of his teaching staff who were on the payroll but had never shown their faces at the school. A tribesman acquaintance had complained to me that two of his cousins, both full-time and wealthy qat farmers, were on the army payroll but only expected to show up for training twice a year. The army, which swallowed around a sixth of Yemen's GDP, was particularly vulnerable to corruption. In 2006 it was estimated that perhaps a third of Yemen's armed forces were in fact 'ghost soldiers' like my acquaintance's cousins, for the simple reason that the size of an officer's budget

YEMEN

depended on the number of soldiers under his command. Surplus ghost soldiers' salaries could be pocketed by the officer and extra kit sold off for personal profit. The higher echelons of the army, dominated by tribesmen, were at liberty to requisition land for military use but also to sell it on for private gain, a practice that had aroused particular anger in the south,² contributing hugely to the prevailing feeling that it had been 'occupied' by the north since the 1994 civil war.

Yemen's public service wage bill was swallowing 13 per cent of the country's GDP in 2000³ but 15 per cent of it by 2005, when the World Bank stepped in to fund a biometric ID system for employees aimed at eradicating what Salih himself estimated to be a 60,000 strong plague of 'double-dippers' (employees on a number of different payrolls) and 'ghost-workers' (employees who never appeared).⁴ By mid-2009, however, it was clear that little progress had been made; an EU commission had calculated that if both the army and security services were included in the purge Yemen could easily lose a grand total of 1,200,000 double-dippers and ghost-workers.⁵ By one estimate, there were 45,000 employees of the PSO in Sanaa alone, some of them responsible for nothing more taxing than attending qat chews and spreading the idea that without Salih at the helm, the country would be lost.⁶ It was equally clear that calling a halt to this thinly disguised dispensing of largesse by a kind and generous sheikh masquerading as a modern president would mean Salih agreeing to disband the biggest constituency with an obvious and solid stake in his remaining at the helm of a united Yemen. Without his vast army of idle and corrupt but solidly loyal civil servants, Salih's credibility as an elected president and Yemen's claim to be a democracy would look very flimsy. He would have no choice but to transform himself into a military dictator.

Judging al-Yaqoub's mood to be sombre enough already, I forbore from asking him why Yemen was buying so many MiG-29s from Russia or why the ministry of finance was not trying to replenish the state coffers by taxing Yemen's highest-earning product after oil: qat. With an estimated one in every seven Yemenis involved in the

CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

cultivation, distribution or sale of the plant, and 72 per cent of Yemeni men (33 per cent of Yemeni women) spending almost 10 per cent of their meagre incomes on it, surely it represented an obvious and immediate source of revenue, as alcohol or tobacco in any other country?⁷ A former finance minister had once informed me that although in theory there was a 10 per cent tax on qat, perhaps only 20 per cent of it was ever collected. A mere 25 million dollars of annual qat tax revenue could and should have been five times that amount, but it would not have been easy, of course. There were tales of tribesmen resisting qat taxation in much the same way as their forebears had resisted the Ottomans' tax farmers. One attempt to set up an army checkpoint to levy the tax on qat-laden passing pick-ups had ended in chaos, with six soldiers taken hostage and their cars stolen.⁸

Qat is one political hot potato and diesel is another, but they are linked. Yemen currently spends \$3.5 billion a year – a quarter of its budget – subsidising 2.9 billion litres of diesel, 70 per cent of which has to be imported. Thanks to these subsidies, a litre of Yemeni diesel costs roughly half what it should. Obviously, the arrangement benefits most Yemeni enterprises, but it also works dangerously to the advantage of two far less deserving groups: qat farmers and white-collar smugglers. A thirsty plant, accounting for 20 per cent of the country's water consumption every year,⁹ qat would be impossible to farm without recourse to mechanical drills and pumps fuelled by subsidised diesel because only with their help is it possible to penetrate deep enough to access the sinking water table. It is fair to say that without subsidised diesel, qat-farming would not be nearly so lucrative a business, and Yemen's water supply would not be so threatened, and more arable land might be used for growing food. At least as damagingly, a steeply rising quantity of subsidised diesel is reportedly being smuggled across the Red Sea to the Horn of Africa by high-ranking civil servants who pocket up to 30 per cent of the original subsidy in the transaction.¹⁰ Urgent demands from foreign donors like the IMF and the World Bank that these fuel subsidies must be removed

YEMEN

before the next injection of aid can be received have only resulted in toppled prime ministers, riots and even deaths, in 1995, 1998 and again, in 2005. In September 2008, a carefully targeted and limited lifting of the fuel subsidies caused panic-buying, stockpiling and such chronic shortages that even the Sanaa public bus service was out of action.

A combination of bad luck and bad management has left Yemen dependent on foreign aid and oil for more than three quarters of its revenue, a risky position, given that neither the price of a barrel of oil nor the generosity of foreign donors can be controlled or predicted. The fact that the country's oil production is projected to diminish from its peak of 460,000 barrels a day in 2002 to only 268,000 by 2010 and that oil revenues had plunged by a catastrophic 75 per cent in the first quarter of 2009, compared to the same period in 2008, was not Salih's fault, although the business environment he had fostered certainly discouraged prospecting. Nor was the world economic recession and resulting slashing of aid budgets in the last quarter of the decade Salih's doing, but some blame him for the fact that in the spring of 2009 as much as half the money spent by the state was swallowed up by unaffordable fuel subsidies benefiting not just Yemeni qat farmers and corrupt officials but also a substantial number of East Africans, and by the wages of a gigantic surplus of civil servants.¹¹

Salih's dancing on the heads of not only tribal sheikhs but civil servants and qat farmers by buying them, and his turning a blind eye to the black market in subsidised diesel could only continue while he had funds. By the end of 2009 signs that the money was starting to run low were not only visible in the form of aggravated instability but in Yemen's steady climb up the index of failing states – from twenty-fourth to twenty-first, to eighteenth position.¹² By the autumn, people were beginning to imagine how the touchpaper of collapse could be lit – when he couldn't pay the wages of the military, some said, by 2012 at the latest.

YEMEN'S DEMOCRACY

When al-Sanabani veered wildly off his public relations message to attack Yemen's parliamentarians and declare in favour of a dictatorship, I was more surprised by his crediting parliament with any influence than by his cynicism. In the pecking order of Yemen's power centres, the House of Representatives ranked far lower than the technocrat-led government ministries, which in turn were nowhere near as powerful as the president and his kinsmen highlander tribesmen who staffed the top echelons of the military and security establishments.

Western governments had heartily applauded Salih's decision to crown the new unity of the Yemens in 1990 with the enfranchisement of every Yemeni adult, male and female, multiple political parties, a free press and the makings of a civil society. But Yemenis, at all levels of society, very soon lost faith and even interest in what even Salih soon wisely began referring to as the country's 'emerging democracy'. Coming barely a year after the Yemen's first general election, the 1994 civil war had badly complicated its birth. In second and third general elections held in 1997 and 2003, the party of the president, the General People's Conference (GPC) increased its already generous lead. Thanks in large part to the first-past-the-post-system, the 123 seats it had won in 1993 became 187 in 1997, when the south's YSP boycotted the election, and then soared again to 229 in 2003.¹³

Such results were only to be expected, it was said, while the regime controlled all the broadcast media (overwhelmingly more powerful than the press in a country with such a low rate of literacy) and while an army of civil servants directly relied on the state for payment of their wages, and while it was impossible to tell where the structures of the state or the regime ended and those of the GPC party began. For by far the larger part of its twenty-year life therefore, Yemen's parliament had been widely and routinely dismissed as window-dressing, only ever created in the first place because Salih had shrewdly calculated that a show of democracy – 'decorative democracy', as Yemenis called it – was

YEMEN

a small price to pay for large injections of foreign aid money. The mere act of holding the 1997 elections, for example, had gained the country a package of aid equal to the size of the national debt.

But it was not as if he systematically demonstrated the parliament's powerlessness by routinely undermining its brave attempts to do its work. One serious flaw was that MPs – the majority of whom belong to the president's GPC, of course – had not been willing or able to challenge Salih's micro-management of the country via his direct control of the finance ministry and the military and security establishments he relied on to ensure his continued hold on power. Yemenis, MPs included, remained conditioned to the belief that, as in the era of the last two imams in the north or British colonial rule in the south, all power was concentrated at the very top. Instead of using parliament as a forum for calling the government and president to account, for formulating and passing laws and toeing an agreed party line, Yemeni MPs tended to treat it as they would any other civil service job, as a resource from which to extract maximum material benefit for themselves. In addition to all this, the adversarial character of western democracies held little appeal for a society that prided itself on having evolved a tribal political culture based on avoiding conflict by recourse to mediation and compromise. From the president down, Yemenis emphasised consultation, compromise and the inclusiveness of 'pluralism', rather than the confrontation and strict party allegiance that characterised western democracies. Individual reputations and family ties continued to carry more weight than political programmes. To add to these handicaps, more than a fifth of the MPs elected in Yemen's third general election, in 2003, had had no formal education, which meant they were either illiterate or barely literate,¹⁴ a mighty obstacle to drafting and discussion of legislation and contracts.

I spoke to many who felt they were wasting their time and energies in Yemen's parliament. Tariq al-Fadhli, who had been happy to take his place in the consultative upper house after 1994, lost interest in its activities as soon as he realised he was powerless to influence the

CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

regime's conduct towards the south and had given up attending its sessions by the time I met him in 2004. A genial Hadhrami lawyer who had allowed himself to be persuaded to become a deputy speaker of the lower house was utterly disenchanted after four years in the post: 'I'm not running for parliament again because it's nothing, it means nothing,' he told me. Hamid al-Ahmar, owner of Yemen's main mobile phone network but also a powerful tribesman thanks to his late father's position as paramount sheikh of the Hashid tribes and speaker of parliament, shared his own misgivings about Yemen's malfunctioning democracy when we met at the large and fashionably glass-fronted premises of his Sabafon headquarters in early 2008. 'I'm fed up now,' he told me, 'there's no point in parliament if it continues like this – when you've got about 238 out of 301 MPs belonging to the GPC, and they're just there to do whatever he [the president] tells them to do.'

Like his father before him, Hamid al-Ahmar is a leading member of the Islah party, which struggles to unite an incoherent array of Saudi-type Salafists like Sheikh al-Zindani and moderate Muslim Brotherhood Islamists, and businessmen from the southern highlands, and conservative northern highland tribal sheikhs like the al-Ahmars under one umbrella. Deliberately created in 1990 by President Salih's most powerful supporters – Hamid's father and Brigadier-General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar* – to attract voters away from the south's Marxist YSP, Islah had taken its time breaking free of its creators and shaping up into anything even resembling a conventional opposition party. After the 1994 war it devoted its energies to banning co-educational classes and sacking female judges in the south, and to opposing the redevelopment of Aden's port as a free trade zone on the grounds that it would attract too many foreign infidels.¹⁵ More popularly, Islah recommended itself by sharing its name with an officially unrelated

* The paramount sheikh's family and the Brigadier-General share a name but are not directly related to each other.

YEMEN

charity that compensated for many of the state's shortcomings in the sphere of social welfare. But in the presidential elections of 1999, the party failed even to field its own candidate.

It was 2005 before Islah began to outgrow its original function as a shield of the northern highland tribal ruling elite and the southern highland industrialists in towns like Taiz and Ibb against the old Marxist threat from the south. In November that year the party switched allegiances to join forces with the its old enemy, the south's YSP, and three other minor parties to oppose the president's GPC in a coalition cumbrously named 'The Program of the Joint Meeting for Political and National Reform' (JMP). Ignoring Islah's original founders (Sheikh al-Ahmar, Sheikh al-Zindani and Brigadier-General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar), who all remained supporters of President Salih, the JMP proceeded – admittedly, at the very last moment – to field a respected southerner, a former oil minister named Faisal bin Shamlan in the presidential election of 2006. Bin Shamlan went on to achieve a creditable 22 per cent of the vote. Accounting for most of the JMP, Islah is currently Yemen's fastest-growing political party.¹⁶

By the spring of 2009 the JMP was still being described as lacking a grass-roots base of support, as less a political party than 'a mechanism to lobby the government for greater concessions',¹⁷ but its various component parts could agree that elections scheduled for April that year needed to be postponed for two years because there was no consensus with the GPC with regard to tinkering with the constitution. The GPC favoured keeping the first-past-the-post single-candidate system, while the JMP demanded a party list system which, it believed, would foster fairness and transparency. The JMP wanted a rule compelling voters to vote in their home electoral districts, while the GPC naturally favoured its surplus army of state workers casting their ballots en masse, in their government offices and barracks, for example. If, on the face of it, the postponement looked like a serious set-back for democracy, the decision was hailed as a victory by the JMP and tacitly approved as the lesser of two evils by western organisations

CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

such as the US's National Democratic Institute, an NGO that has been anxiously fostering democratic development in Yemen. It was felt that by refusing to go on serving as window dressing for the regime, by threatening to boycott the elections, the JMP had finally succeeded in wrong-footing Salih. At last, the JMP were all agreed that, in Hamid al-Ahmar's words, 'the country's real problem is the president'.

The following month, in May 2009, on the eve of the nineteenth anniversary of Yemen's unification, over a thousand delegates attended a two-day meeting convened by the JMP and chaired by Hamid al-Ahmar, to confront the country's multiple crises: revived secessionism in the south, the prospect of a sixth Saada war, a lively new al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, economic meltdown, electricity cuts, the rocketing price of flour, and so on. Appropriately, the mood was more sombre than celebratory: 'We should observe the event [the anniversary] with development projects rather than military parades,'¹⁸ declared the young al-Ahmar, to enthusiastic applause. Needless to say, Salih's military parade went ahead the next day. An hour-long procession of 30,000 troops with their Russian tanks and aeroplanes, the largest ever seen in Sanaa, marched past the president who was seated on his rostrum, safely shielded by a bullet-proof glass wall, while down in Aden a demonstration of 3,000 secessionists was broken up by police, leaving three dead, thirty wounded and over a hundred under arrest. By August, Hamid was boldly telling Al-Jazeera television that President Salih should step down and be tried for treason, for the crime of appointing too many of his relatives to high posts.

Signs of Hamid al-Ahmar's intensifying political activity came as no surprise. He had played a leading role in Islah's slow maturing process and had clearly had his sights set on power by the time I met him in the spring of 2008. A short but sturdily built man in his early forties, usually dressed as a tribesman (*thowb* or *futa*, *jambiyah* and sandals) but with the addition of a Harris tweed jacket to complement a good command of English gained at a Brighton language school, he had ushered me into a penthouse office furnished with a large desk, a

YEMEN

display of antique *jambiyahs* and photographs of his late father. One of Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar's nineteen offspring, the third of his ten sons, Hamid was looking like Islah's obvious leader-in-waiting but refusing to be formally appointed. He explained that having risked loud criticism of President Salih while his beloved father still lived, he was being careful, missing his father's influence and protection.

His reluctance to act and confront had seemed to me a graphic illustration of the way Salih's snake-dancing style of rule had hampered the country's movement in a democratic direction but kept the president in power. Like so many of the larger tribal sheikhs, the al-Ahmar clan have benefited gigantically by their close association with Salih during the past three decades. Although Hamid might object to the way in which Salih was running the country, he would need to think twice before biting the hand that had been feeding him and his brothers the pick of lucrative agencies for foreign firms, for example. Nevertheless, over a lavish lunch spread for us on his boardroom table, he confided his ambition to be the next Yemeni to try his luck at ruling Yemen. 'I'm proud and willing to do the job' he told me, 'When you want to help your country, you don't count the danger.' If push (playing by the rules of modern democracy by getting elected) ever came to shove (mounting a traditional tribal armed rebellion in the manner of his Zaydi forbears) he would only, as he put it, 'need to phone about a hundred people to rally about 50,000 fighters' to his cause. Not that he was planning to take the 'shove' route to power, but he worried Salih might try and change the constitution's goal-posts by permitting himself another term as president, after his present one expired in 2013.

Hamid would not be satisfied, as his father had been, with exerting power and influence in the background, comfortable in the knowledge that he was 'not directly responsible for the hunger and suffering of the people'. His experience as a modern businessman meant that he was used to wielding direct power and taking direct responsibility, to saying what he meant and meaning what he said. My first thought was that, frustrated by the slow and disorganised pace of ordinary Yemeni

CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

life and by the endless and expensive task of balancing disparate interests, by the old need to dance on snakes' heads, he would soon lose patience and turn tyrannical. By the time we had finished tearing at a leg of lamb and scooping at a dish of honey pudding together, however, his quick intelligence and sense of humour had persuaded me otherwise and, by the time I left the premises, I believed that Yemenis could do a lot worse than elect such a likeable blend of both the traditional and the modern Yemen as their president.

Subsequently, I met a number of not just northerners but southerners too who told me they respected and trusted Hamid al-Ahmar, in spite of his family's position at the very apex of the northern highlander military-tribal ascendancy. One southerner judged him 'certainly not worse' than Salih, while another praised him as 'politically sober' and by far the best-educated member of his family. But others, northerners more closely acquainted with him, relayed tales of his thuggish business practices, of the ways in which he had abused his position to enrich himself and once badly sullied his democratic credentials by helping himself to some ballot boxes at gunpoint in Hajja, back in 1993.

In the evening of the day of that boardroom lunch, the affable and Yale University-educated Abdul Karim al-Iryani, a leading member of the GPC who had served as both foreign and prime minister, a member of the *qadhi* rather than the tribesman class, wasted no time in pouring cold water on my claim that I might have lunched with Yemen's next president. 'I very much hope not!' he declared, 'I don't doubt he's a good businessman, but if he was president he would just put members of his own tribe in power, and the Hashid are the biggest, as you know. It would be even worse than what we have now!'

THE DANCER

An essence of that 'what we have now' had been memorably captured in a larger than life-size oil painting adorning the atrium hallway of the

YEMEN

GPC's central office in Sanaa. It was a portrait of President Salih, but unlike any I had seen before.

Framed portraits of Yemen's short but reasonably good-looking leader grace almost every home and public building in the country but are especially visible on the sides and roofs of public buildings in Aden, which favour an image of him head down, writing, hard at work. Others depict him in a variety of costumes: in tribal head-dress, *thowb* and *jambiyah*, in a western-style dark suit, pale blue shirt and plain tie, in military uniform, or even – by 2009 – bespectacled, tweed-jacketed and smiling in an approachably avuncular fashion. Although, as on a giant billboard on the road from Sanaa into Hodeidah, he is as gamely grinning as if he were advertising toothpaste, his expression is usually sombre, his brow knitted in visionary thought and his jaw firmly tilted forward. In this particular oil painting, however, he is dressed in a lounge suit and unsmiling but seated astride a richly caparisoned chestnut steed against a pitch black background enlivened by arcs of colourfully exploding fireworks. His shop mannequin stiffness and an outsize pair of dark glasses suggest both wilful blindness and a sinister power. I guessed the artist was obliquely criticising a leader who had deliberately blinded himself to his people's sufferings but, if I was right, the critique was too subtle to have hit its mark; the masterful satire was hanging there in pride of place where every GPC functionary who worked in the building would pass by it every day. It was hard to blame the artist for erring on the side of caution, however. Jokes at the expense of President Salih have been known to have serious consequences.

Salih's entourage had targeted Yemen's funniest satirist, Fahd al-Qarni, a young actor from Taiz, as a particularly dangerous snake. An active member of Islah, al-Qarni was hurled in jail for the third time in as many years for allegedly insulting the president and fanning the fires of southern separatism with his jokes. A cassette recording of his song 'Fed Up' first landed him behind bars during the presidential elections of 2006. In the summer of 2008, shortly before he went on trial again, a convoy of a hundred cars filled with al-Qarni's fans journeyed from

CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

Hadhramaut to Taiz for a protest sit-in outside the courthouse, only to endure beatings by the police. The next day, treated by the prosecution to a recording of a skit featuring a clueless but reckless taxi driver with a voice identical to that of the president, the courtroom dissolved in helpless laughter, but al-Qarni was sentenced to eighteen months in jail and a large fine. Unrepentant but amnestied by the president in September, he was briefly rearrested in February 2009 for the same crime, before being released again.

Although Yemen has rejoiced in a press that is freer than that of any of her neighbours since 1990, there are subjects better left untouched by journalists who value their skins. They have learned by trial and error not to delve into four key topics: the president's family and especially the question of whether his eldest son Ahmad will succeed him; the country's sovereignty with reference to secessionism in the south and the rebellion in the north-west; religion; and the military. In 2005 the correspondent for the London-based *Al-Quds al-Arabi*'s uncovering of a corrupt trade in fighter-plane spare parts that had accounted for a number of MiG-29 crashes cost him two days' detention by air force high command and a night of interrogation, until President Salih himself ordered his release. The case of Khaled al-Khaiwani, a newspaper editor trying to report on subjects like Yemen's jails and the Saada war, was eventually taken up by Amnesty International. In 2004 al-Khaiwani spent a year in jail for insulting the president. Amnestied in 2005, he was rearrested in 2007 – snatched off a Sanaa street by masked PSO gunmen in a Toyota Land Cruiser – thrown into their security service jail and beaten up, before being amnestied again. In 2008 he was rearrested and sentenced to six years behind bars, but once again pardoned by Salih. His rearrest in January 2009 raised a storm of international protest and yet again he was pardoned, after receiving Amnesty International's Award for Journalism Under Threat. The closure of Aden's independent *al-Ayyam* newspaper in May 2009 and a physical attack on the paper's offices served as a tacit acknowledgement by Sanaa of the power of the written press to promote separatism in Yemen's second city.

YEMEN

Frequent arrests, amnesties and rearrests of political dissidents, whether they are journalists like al-Khaiwani, or comedians like al-Qarni, or southern secessionists like young Ahmad bin Ferid, or jihadists like the men who attacked the USS *Cole*, furnish useful proof that not only is Salih not an all-powerful dictator but he is also far from being a bloodthirsty tyrant in the mould of Saddam Hussein or Imam Ahmad, for example. Nor does the secret of his survival in power lie in a monopoly over the country's means of coercion. How could it when there are reportedly an average of three guns in circulation for every Yemeni man, woman and child and when many of the larger tribes boast their own arsenals of even heavy weaponry? And it was certainly not attributable to his having steadily improved his people's living standards, let alone to his having firmly established the rule of law.

Two Sanaani women I spoke to, both of them educated to university level, were inclined to blame his entourage rather than Salih himself – the evil counsellors, rather than the king himself – for their country's many problems. While one male civil servant swiftly diagnosed the president's problem by saying 'he still has a 1970s mentality', his female colleague, a schoolteacher, insisted that as a woman she was grateful to Salih – 'thanks to him, I can work, I can sit in Parliament, and it may be difficult but there is no law to say that I can't sit in a car with a man who is not from my family.' Back came her male colleague's reply, 'All right, he has given us some freedoms. For example, we are free to talk, but as that old man once complained to him on television "You [Salih] have taken the sticking plaster off our lips and stuffed it in your ears!" What good is being able to talk when the one with the power is not listening?'

Southerners with direct, personal knowledge of Salih tend to be far more critical of him, although all agreed that he was 'charming' and emphasised his lack of self-importance, his unrivalled 'common touch'. A wealthy resident of Hadda, a southerner and government minister, thought hard before attempting to describe him. 'When he speaks to you he gives you his full attention and you are the only person in his world. He is very, very intelligent, and he has a unique memory, and he

CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

is not a bloodthirsty person,' was how he began. 'But he is one of the best liars on this earth,' was how he ended. The verdict of a fellow southerner, a Hadhrami lawyer, was harsher still; he compared Salih to past imams who surrounded themselves with incompetent nonentities: 'He barely has a primary school education which means that he has an inferiority complex, so the last thing he wants is brilliant people around him.' An Adeni newspaper editor revealed that a far from charming Salih, an enraged and whisky-sozzled Salih, was in the habit of telephoning the paper late at night to dispute the contents of his front page, especially any coverage of unrest in the south. Abdullah Al-Asnag, the clever leader of the Adeni trade unions in the turbulent years before the British departed, who subsequently served as a minister in YAR governments under al-Iryani, al-Hamdi and al-Ghashmi as well as being adviser to Salih until 1984, confined his comment to a single sentence: 'Ignorance combined with arrogance is the end of the world.'

Most Yemenis – both admirers and critics – had no trouble acknowledging that the real key to Salih's success has been his uncannily acute understanding and encyclopaedic knowledge of Yemen's tribal society. It is his intuitive sense that he must only ever be perceived as behaving in the manner of a wise and just sheikh – mediating, balancing, reconciling, co-opting, rewarding, forgiving – that (alongside his access to the oil revenues since 1986) has preserved him from the fate of his two predecessors for so long.

No one disputes that for an uneducated tribesman with only a decent career in the army to recommend him, Salih has done astonishingly well. But there are clear signs that at the age of sixty-eight (he was born in March 1942), and with funds running short, he is flagging. As the sickness created by Yemen's chronic and interrelated and multiplying problems grows ever less curable by recourse to the sticking plasters of bribery and promises, as the complex demands of running a modern state proliferate and the money begins to run out, his hold on power is perceived to be slipping. As early as November 2005 his nervous entourage were shielding him from the shaming news that, owing to

YEMEN

Yemen's failure to meet various good governance criteria, Washington was withholding some \$30 million of aid. Certainly, his fuse was shorter than it had been, his patience with dissent much more limited. In the spring of 2008 he shocked and disgusted ordinary Yemenis by using the occasion of a Festival of Camels and Horsemanship in the Tihaman port city of Hodeidah to tell those threatening the country's integrity, 'Our slogan is unity or death and he who does not like this, let him drink from the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea.'¹⁹ At around the same time a government minister told me, 'Until about a year ago it looked as if he was still the strong man with all the strings in his hands. Now it's different. He issues the orders, but they're not being fulfilled. The people around him are doing what they want' – abusing their power to act with his authority.

I recalled Ahmad al-Fadhli musing along the same lines during one of our chats at his banana farm; 'the bugs in your own shirt are the ones that can really hurt you', was how he had put it.

THE BUGS IN HIS SHIRT

The 'bugs' in President Salih's shirt are arranged in three concentric rings. First comes immediate family, his own children and his nephews who belong to the Bayt al-Affash clan of the Sanhan tribe, which itself is a member of the larger Hashid Federation. The next ring comprises other members of the Sanhan tribe belonging to the al-Qadhi clan, who include two half-brothers and his distant cousin Brigadier-General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar. Both these Sanhan clans regard their rural heartland as the village of Bayt al-Ahmar, a half-hour drive to the east of Sanaa, where Salih was raised and has built himself a large residence. Beyond these two innermost circles are other Sanhanis and members of his predecessor al-Ghashmi's Hamdan-Sanaa tribe, which also belongs to the larger Hashid Federation of the Zaydi northern highlands.

These widening circles of people who not only hold high positions in the presidential household and offices but crucially in the military and security establishments while heading lucrative enterprises and

CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

acting as local agents for foreign corporations, are the guarantors of his security. For the time being too many people still have too vested an interest in Salih continuing in the post of president to mount a coup d'état. As one member of the upper house of Yemen's parliament put it to me, 'If something happens to the president, they'll all suffer too, so they let him be.' However, the cost of maintaining these concentric circles, especially of his defensive ramparts in the army, security service and personal guard, is considerable; officially declared to account for 25.4 per cent of the annual budget in 2003, it is unofficially estimated by foreign observers to be nearer the 40 per cent mark.²⁰

Of Salih's immediate, close family, little is generally known beyond the fact that he has three wives, ten daughters and seven sons. Among his seven sons there is his eldest son Ahmad, an affable and unpretentious person by all accounts but inclined to dissolute behaviour and lacking in charisma, who heads both the elite Special Forces and the Republican Guards and has long been viewed, though not welcomed, as Salih's heir apparent. Muhammad Duwayd, the husband of his daughter Saba, is in charge of the all-important Secretariat of the Presidential Palace. One nephew, Amar Mohammed Abdullah Salih, is deputy head of the National Security Bureau (NSB) and reputed to be a man western counter-terrorism agencies can do business with. Another nephew, named Tariq Mohammed Abdullah Salih, commands the president's close protection force and is the third most powerful officer in the army. Yet another, Yahya Mohammed Abdullah Salih, is the Staff Officer of the Central Security forces.

An attempt to get a feel for the inner circles of bugs infesting Salih's shirt by driving through the village of Bayt al-Ahmar with Walid one late afternoon in 2008 ended in failure, with Walid badly unnerved by a pair of sleek young men in plain clothes appearing from almost nowhere to politely forbid us to drive any further up the road or even to try to photograph the president's country residence, which includes a handsome domed mosque. The way one of them scribbled our car registration number on the back of his hand was what rattled Walid. Most of

YEMEN

the top echelons of Yemen's defence establishment hail from Bayt-al Ahmar, including the Commander of the Air Force, Mohammed Salih al-Ahmar, and Brigadier-General Ali Salih al-Ahmar, the chief of staff of the general army command and, most importantly of all, the man reckoned to be the second most powerful person in the country, the commander of the north-western military sector which includes Saada and Sanaa, Brigadier-General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar.

When Yemenis lounge at their qat chews, pondering how a future without President Salih might look, the brigadier-general's name is always mentioned, and the assumption usually made that he would be far more tolerant of Islamists of most stripes – from mildly Muslim Brotherhood to Saudi Wahhabi style, and perhaps even dyed-in-the-wool jihadists of the al-Qaeda persuasion. He had facilitated the passage of jihadists to the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, remained close to Tariq al-Fadhli, married his sister and recruited him to the cause of unity on the side of the north in the civil war of 1994, and gone on to supervise the funnelling of Yemeni jihadists to Iraq after 2003.

As early as 2002, when the American author Robert Kaplan was in Yemen researching a book on the American military abroad, it had been clear that thanks to Brigadier-General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar the country was quietly circumventing President George W. Bush's bellicose war cry of 'you're either with us or against us'. Instead, it was spreading its risk by being both for and against, much as the YAR had sided with the West against Marxism during the Cold War while looking to the USSR for its armaments. Kaplan wrote: 'it was Ali Muhsen's ties to the radicals that gave the president the political protection he needed to move closer to the Americans – temporarily that is. And also to distance himself from the Americans swiftly and credibly if that, too, became necessary.'²¹ It was also Brigadier-General al-Ahmar who brokered the deal that kept Yemen almost free from jihadist incidents between 2003 and 2007; if the jihadists refrained from attacking targets inside Yemen, then Yemen would neither hunt them down or extradite them to the US.

CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

But the breakdown of the tacit agreement with the jihadists after 2007 and subsequent attacks by an Iraq-hardened generation of al-Qaeda likewise damaged his credibility among the other bugs in Salih's shirt, let alone with the general population. Some believe the brigadier-general and the president – both Sanhani tribesmen of the Hashid northern highlander tribal federation, but from different clans – long ago agreed that the former would replace the latter when the time was ripe, but that Salih has reneged on the deal by setting out, like the imams before him, to groom his son for the succession. Such people viewed all Yemen's troubles through a highly personalised prism of a two-man rivalry resembling that of Octavian and Mark Antony, or Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. For example, if Salih had used his son's Republican Guard up in Saada to humiliate Ali Muhsin's regular army, Ali Muhsin was getting his own back by encouraging his old friend and brother-in-law, Tariq al-Fadhli, to whip up trouble in the south.

By the end of 2009, no one and nothing looked strong enough to reverse Yemen's decline as a useful ally of the West or its rise as a jihadist stronghold. Thanks to southern separatism and the al-Huthi rebellion threatening the integrity of the country and Salih's apparent inability to tackle either with anything but force, events looked closer to boiling point than they had done since the civil war of 1994. Those accustomed to watching Yemen, as Kremlinologists once watched Moscow, knew that not only at qat chews in Sanaa and Aden and Mukalla and Taiz and Ibb, but among the diaspora all over the Gulf and beyond, in Britain and the United States, talks were being had, soundings being taken, new and improbable alliances being forged. While western intelligence agencies and think-tanks vaguely and gloomily forecast that a power vacuum and chaos in Yemen would open the door to a jihadist takeover and an important victory for al-Qaeda that might destabilise Saudi Arabia and so threaten the rest of the world, Yemenis able to afford the luxury of thinking about anything but their immediate daily needs felt themselves to be participating in a real and current, not an imagined and future, drama: the disintegration of their country.

NOTES

CHAPTER 9: CAN THE CENTRE HOLD?

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