

But Bygones Can't Be Bygones if the Pain Is Raw

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ALGIERS, Oct. 4 - Who will be the author of [Algeria's](#) history?

Will it be a former member of the Islamic Salvation Front, Nassiridin Turkman, who says that Islamic militants played no role in the massacres that left more than 100,000 innocent civilians dead in the 1990's?

Will it be the president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who maintains that the state's security institutions played no role in the disappearance of more than 6,000 people?

Or will it be the member of Parliament who says that people are not really missing at all, but rather are hiding in Europe?

It is, of course, impossible to say who will write the final chapter concerning a civil war that paralyzed this country for more than a decade. But what is certain, right now, is that President Bouteflika has decided he is not interested in an accurate accounting of the past. The president has just pushed through a Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, approved recently by voters, that offers amnesty to militants for all but the worst crimes and exonerates state security agencies from wrongdoing. He has decided that the best antidote to the violence that divided his country is to declare that everyone is a victim, and to try to move forward.

But the years of killing have left many people angry, alienated from one another, distrustful of their government and locked in their own accounting of the past. Without any formal process of truth and reconciliation, the details of Algeria's history depend on who is talking, and that has some people concerned about the future.

"If we do not have reconciliation, we will not be able to heal the wounds, they will remain open," said Daho Djerbal, editor of a journal of social criticism in Algeria called Naqd. "We live in a society where individuals are part of a group, and we fear that there will be actions of revenge and vendetta."

Algeria is not the first country to try to sweep its past sins away. [Argentina](#) and [Chile](#), for example, each tried to bury a violent past only to find that the years did little to ease society's collective conscience. Today each has moved toward accountability and repentance. Chile forced its military to apologize to torture victims. Argentina has declared its amnesty laws unconstitutional.

In Algeria, the outlines of what sickened this country are well known: in 1991, the government agreed to allow its first multiparty elections for Parliament. A fundamentalist

group, the Islamic Salvation Front, which already controlled local councils all over the country and had issued communiqués saying it was opposed to democracy, seemed to be winning control.

At that point the military stepped in, nullifying the elections and declaring martial law. Members of the front, known as F.I.S., were arrested and sent off to camps in the desert. The Islamist militants took up arms, ran into the mountains and began the civil war.

But the broad outlines of this conflict do little to ameliorate the pain of children whose parents were killed for no reason; or parents, whose children were dragged away never to be seen again. Both sides want answers and accountability, and yet none are forthcoming. "What upsets me is, in 10 years' time the children of victims of terrorism will wonder why their parents were killed," said Salima Tlemcani, a reporter who for more than a decade has written about Islamist activities for the independent newspaper El Watan. "According to the version now put forth by the Islamists, and the process the government has adopted, those children will think their parents were killed because they were not on the right side."

Mr. Turkman lives and works in Medea, a poor, religious city in the mountains an hour's drive from Algiers. During the mid-1990's, it was the heart of a region known as the triangle of death. There is calm in Medea today, but that may well be because there are so many police agents on the streets and roadblocks around town.

Mr. Turkman said he was a leader within the F.I.S., the political boss of all the local councils. He is well acquainted with the party's past, with its members taking up arms and going to the mountains, with the killing of police officers and the massacre of civilians. Today Mr. Turkman serves coffee and herbal infusions in the center of town. He speaks of the F.I.S. as an enlightened party that embraced democracy and whose members never took up arms against civilians.

"We are not only saying we are innocent, we are saying we are innocent and we are victims," he said.

There have long been rumors that the Islamists were infiltrated by state agents who pushed them to kill civilians so they would lose credibility with the public. It is a question people would like answered. But in the absence of definitive answers, Mr. Turkman is quick to provide his own.

"We know we didn't do anything," he said. "Go to these places and see who is dead. All our families."

One of the most troubling questions hanging over Algeria concerns the missing. During the war, thousands of people were taken away by state security agents and government-armed militias, never to be seen again. A presidential commission studied the issue and said that, in fact, 6,146 individuals were taken by security agents, a figure that human rights groups say is low. The report tried to absolve the state of responsibility by saying

the disappearances were the actions of rogue agents. But now the government, in its recently adopted charter for peace, and its supporters are insisting that the state agents did nothing wrong and that the issue of the missing is resolved - even while it is not.

"We cannot make any concessions on knowing the truth," said Lila Ighil, whose brother Mohammed has been missing since 1997 and who runs an advocacy group for relatives of the missing. "What they are saying now, this is not true."

But in support of the president, a member of Parliament, Ayachi Daadoua, said in an interview that the government had recently come across new information that proved that many of the missing were actually alive and well.

"We have found out in this campaign for the charter that a lot of people considered missing are living under different names and are parts of organizations based in [Great Britain](#) and [Germany](#)," he said.

Critics of the government say the problem with the sweep-it-under-the-rug approach is that it speaks to a fundamental flaw in a society that is trying to present itself as fit to rejoin the international community. The problem, they say, is it shows that Algeria remains a country ruled by power, not by laws. And that is a problem that, as in Chile and Argentina, will ultimately need to be addressed, no matter how much time passes.