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How much are Algerians hostage to their 'collective memory'?

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Dr. Anissa Daoudi

After having been eclipsed in the news by the events of the Arab Uprisings, Algeria is back in international headlines over the hostage crisis in Tiguentourine in Southern Algeria. The repercussions and long-term implications of this crisis must be understood in relation to Algeria’s complex history and in particular its recent civil war experience.

The Algerian civil war, known also as ‘the dirty war’, which lasted a decade in the 1990’s and cost the lives of over 150,000 people, is remembered by Algerians vividly and is contributing to the formation of the ‘new’ Algerian identity. This new identity might be seen by some Arabs, particularly those Arabs who have experienced ‘revolution’, as docile and even ‘obedient’. This is in fact a different identity to the one that Algerians are known for; ‘rebels, fighters, anything but obedient’.

This view is, however, challenged by Algerians who are haunted by their shared versions of the past, their individual and collective memories about the Algerian wars, both the latest war (the civil war of the 1990’s) and the Algerian revolution (1954-1962). These wars have affected three generations since independence in 1962. The construction of ‘collective memories’ mediated through the ‘grand narratives’ about the Algerian liberation war have been the centre of struggle over decades and have also been repeatedly used and abused by the officials and the political elite to legitimise and provide frameworks for the interpretations of the past, the present and the future. The same history of violence has been a substance for neo-orientalists to reduce the country into what McDougal analytically argues against and questions in his article ‘Savage wars? Codes of violence in Algeria, 1830s-1990s’.

To ordinary Algerians, the ‘Arab Spring’ does not necessarily mean a ‘better life’; on the contrary, it brings back individual, social and political memories of war and bloodshed. It is very common to hear some Algerians saying: “we had our ‘Arab Spring’, and no one lifted a finger to help us”. Adding that the total death of Algerians over ten years is much higher than other countries, and that it is only ‘they’ who know exactly what it means to fight against terrorism. When you talk to the older generation (those who lived in the colonial period), they still bring back their ‘memories’ of the colonial atrocities. They would also say that it is only ‘they’ who know what it means to be colonised. The Algerian political elite have invested heavily in monopolising the narratives and in shaping the official discourse(s) over both wars. The hegemonic discourse(s) over the wars have remained on the whole unchallenged until recently. But these opposing voices have not really made a big impact.

The current situation in the Arab region has not helped either, and has given support to the government to prove to most ordinary Algerians that ‘they’ are better placed to deal with terrorism than anybody else in the region and maybe in the world. They further argue that this discourse is backed by the Americans and the French. Western interference in the Middle East (e.g., in Afghanistan and Iraq) reinforces and legitimises the Algerian discourse to NOT trust the ‘West’ and to keep away from ‘revolts’.

“By agreeing to open Algerian airspace to French fighter jets on their way to Mali, and to close its southern border, Algiers has unwillingly relapsed into an old war it knows only too well” (Sèbe, 2013). Indeed, the Algerian generals, have opened up a door that they worked hard to close, and have put themselves in a big conundrum: while recently, they adamantly refused to interfere for example, in the Libyan revolts and built an iron gate between the two countries and the two peoples, now they offer help to the French (i.e., west) who are/were the colonisers in the ‘collective memory’. This undoubtedly questions the (thawabit) i.e., fundamentals which are the non-interference of foreigners in the Algerian affairs, backed by the persistent discourse glorifying the Algerian military forces in dealing with terrorism, giving them a carte blanche to take unilateral decisions to deal with counter terrorism the way they see fit. Thus, when the international reactions against the way the Algerian military forces were voiced, Algerian national TV was once again used, showing some Algerians giving their support and reminding the world that Algeria’s experience in dealing with terrorism is unchallenged.

What Algerian grand-parents tell their children about their past, ‘the old days’, is not very different from what their children (second generation) tell their own children (third generation). In other words, the history of Algeria and the images of the past are marked deeply by memories of violence and wars that cannot be dismissed and should not be forgotten when dealing with Algeria. Having said that, Algeria, on the other hand, should not be held hostage to some neo-orientalists’ views, as rightly argued by Nathalie Vince in her article about the British media’s scandalous handling of the recent hostage crisis (Vince, 2013)*.

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