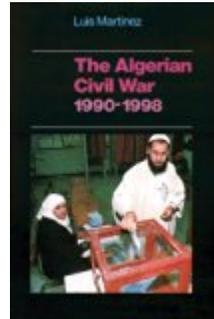


Luis Martinez. *The Algerian Civil War, 1990-1998*. Translated by Jonathan Derrick. The CERI Series in Comparative Politics and International Studies. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. xxi + 265 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11996-2.

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The Logic of the Algerian Civil War

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Algeria stood out among Arab countries in the late 1980s and early 1990s in taking concrete steps toward the establishment of a liberal democracy. In a desperate effort to shore up its flagging legitimacy, the ruling FLN (National Liberation Front) arranged for Algeria's first national elections. The provision of such a political opening was a gamble, but the regime assumed that the electorate would rally behind its newly found political liberalism, thus restoring its political fortunes. It therefore came as a shock when the Islamist FIS (Front Islamique du Salut) handily won the initial round of municipal elections and appeared set to win the next far more significant national round of voting scheduled for 1992.

However, the National Assembly election was not allowed to run its course. In order to prevent the FIS from assuming power, the army intervened on January 11, 1992 to unseat President Chadli Benjadid and call off the electoral proceedings. Rather than experience a flowering of civil society, Algeria slipped into a civil war of exceptional savagery and violence, which pitted a variety of armed Islamist groups, several of them spin-offs of the FIS, against the security forces of the state.

At its height, the struggle was marked by massacres of civilians, including the notorious 1997 killings by radical Islamists of some four hundred women, children, and men at Bentalha in the Mitidja plain. Government anti-insurgency operations, for their part, were blamed for extra-judicial killings and other atrocities. To date

the conflict has claimed perhaps 100,000 lives, more than those killed in the Lebanese civil war during the mid-1970s and early 1980s.

Luis Martinez, author of *The Algerian Civil War, 1990-1998*, sets himself the task of explaining the causal factors behind the slide into violence. Given the contentious nature of the subject, this is a tall order and it requires that Martinez, a researcher at CERI (Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales) in Paris, scrutinize the available evidence in a manner that is both thorough and disciplined. The result is a work that lays bare the internal dynamics of a situation of political violence, which participants justify with reference to political ideals but which in fact is rooted in the more mundane concerns of material advancement.

To his credit, Martinez dismisses as overly simplistic explanations of the conflict that privilege Islamist ideology as the chief element. "From this viewpoint," Martinez writes, "the war against the government is seen as arising from the question of the latter's legitimacy, and the struggle for the Shari'ah is seen as one reappearing identically and chronologically in 'Muslim societies.'" In this essentialist view, represented by scholars as diverse as Bernard Lewis and Muhammad Arkoun, "the violence of the Islamist fighters is supposed to be justified by reference to an 'Islamic imaginaire' which incorporates all situations of civil war and violence in the states of the Arab and Muslim world" (p. 8).

In his effort to come to grips with the "real inter-

ests and motivations” of political actors, Martinez adopts the assumptions of rational choice theory, which holds that most, if not all, forms of human activity are goal-oriented and organized around sets of hierarchically ordered preferences. Seen from this perspective, the activities of the radical Islamists and their government opponents become pragmatic and rationally calculated attempts to gain wealth and social prestige within parameters set by the postcolonial state. In Martinez’s telling, the political and ideological content of the 1991-1992 electoral contests was subordinated during the period of civil war to the ruthless and focused efforts of each side to maximize its power against the other. In what is perhaps the most controversial tenet of his thesis, Martinez contends that the purposeful accumulation of wealth and status by means of violence is deeply ingrained in Algeria’s national culture. In resorting to war, the contending parties simply replicated in their own time the “banditry” of the Ottoman era Corsairs and Caids.

Martinez traces the outbreak of the civil war to the policies of repression carried out by the military government against the FIS following the cancellation of the 1992 election. In an effort to nip the Islamist challenge in the bud, the State authorities closed FIS-affiliated mosques and interrogated individuals deemed suspicious, often picking them up off the street. These and other repressive policies had a radicalizing effect on many Algerians, especially on the young hittistes, the unemployed “wall leaners” whose interests previously had revolved around Rai music and football but who now gravitated to individuals willing effectively to resist the state authorities.

As Martinez explains, these and other disaffected elements of society found an outlet for their humiliation and anger in the radical Islamist groups that had either formed or consolidated in the wake of the military takeover, organizations such as the MIA (Armed Islamic Movement) and GIA (Armed Islamic Group). At odds with FIS’s procedural approach to politics, the emirs of these groups took their cues from the jihadist tradition represented by the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb and his disciples, which included the pronouncement of anathema on those sectors of the State and society deemed to have compromised the sovereignty of God. As many of FIS’s more economically well-to-do supporters scurried to avoid the mounting conflict, often abandoning businesses and expensive homes, the more disaffected elements of the society girded themselves for what would amount to “total war” against the government. As in other comparable conflicts in which terrorism and assas-

sination are the norm, the ensuing violence had the effect of polarizing allegiances and choices.

The most arresting sections of the book chronicle the momentum of the struggle as it absorbed the energies and resources of the combatants. Martinez tells of how each side made use of a variety of strategies in order to enhance its power and weaken the other in the absence of victory in a frontal battle.

Chief among these were the efforts by the contending parties to gather economic assets, initially to empower their respective war efforts but eventually for purposes of personal advancement. While the armed Islamist bands turned, within the territories they controlled, to extortion and other nefarious means, the government benefited from the financial support awarded it by the international community, which feared an Islamist takeover on the southern flank of the Mediterranean. This support took the form of debt rescheduling and a program of structural readjustment. It also included a policy of trade liberalization, which, as Martinez explains, unintentionally benefited the armed Islamists by enabling them to boost their economic resources as managers of import-export companies. Drawing upon interviews of individual participants in the struggle, Martinez paints a grim picture of life within the Islamist-controlled communes of Greater Algiers. Subjected to the thuggish tactics of the local emirs and their accomplices, many of whom were common criminals, and surrounded at the outskirts of their townships by the armed forces of the State, the ordinary people of the “Islamist ghettos” endured a “double state of siege.”

Martinez is pessimistic about the chances of the Algerian regime to decisively defeat radical Islamism and put an end to terrorism. Rather, he proffers a scenario in which the government will co-opt and absorb the Islamist guerilla commanders and gang leaders, offering these an opportunity to share power within the State as political managers of some sort. Given time, he suggests, the Islamists may even supplant the current crop of military men, much as the Chaouchs succeeded “in supplanting the ‘Djouads’ (the warrior nobility of the east) in acquiring the status of Caid (native official under the French) at the beginning of the twentieth century” (p. 248). Such an outcome is fully congruent with Martinez’s vision of the Algerian State as a historical arena of political and social contestation, in which elite figures typically replace one another through violence and with alacrity.

Martinez makes a good case for focusing on material advancement rather than ideology as the central moti-

vating factor of the civil war. Yet his penchant for seeing the conflict as rooted in Algeria's ancient political culture smacks of the cultural essentialism he himself derides. While political culture is always an important element in determining the motivations and tactics of actors, it is tricky business to make it the prime determinant in a historical argument. For example, Martinez might have examined more thoroughly the influence on the Algerian struggle of international factors, including the impact of the trans-national Islamist networks. Many Algerian fighters, after all, participated as Mujahidin in the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan and remained in touch with their Egyptian, Chechen, and Saudi colleagues well into the 1990s. It would be interesting to know whether the violence in Algeria is fed, in part, from

a source common to other Islamist insurgencies of the period. Jonathan Derrick has admirably translated the book from the original French and John Entlis provides it with a preface that usefully recounts the background to Martinez's narrative. Altogether, *The Algerian Civil War* is a valuable contribution to our understanding of Algeria's troubled present.

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