

**Colonial and Post-Colonial Identities:  
Women Veterans of the “Battle of Algiers”**

*Natalya Vince* \*

When seventeen-year-old student Baya Hocine was put on trial in Algiers in late 1957, accused of planting bombs for the Algerian *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), the French colonial authorities sought out her school reports for the case file. Baya Hocine’s teachers describe an excellent student: extremely intelligent with a lively personality, although reluctant to express any unhappy emotions.<sup>1</sup> Could her teachers have guessed that this high-achieving pupil of the French education system in colonial Algeria would go on to commit such a violent expression of anti-colonialism, planting a bomb in an Algiers stadium that killed two people and injured 24 others? It seems unlikely. Unrepentant, Baya Hocine was condemned to death, then reprieved, and passed the rest of the liberation struggle in prison until Algerian Independence was finally won in 1962. Twenty years later, she was a deputy in the Algerian National Assembly during the debates around the introduction of a Family Code. Baya Hocine energetically argued against the Code, which institutionalized gender inequality and reduced women to the status of minors for life, only to be

---

\* Natalya Vince received her Ph.D. in 2008 from the University of London (Queen Mary) for her thesis, “To be a Moudjahida in Independent Algeria: Itineraries and Memories of Women Veterans of the Algerian War.” Her research interests lie in twentieth century French and North African history, politics and society. She is a lecturer in the School of Languages and Area Studies at the University of Portsmouth.

The author would like to thank Robert Aldrich for his insightful comments on the revision of this paper. All translations are the author’s own unless otherwise indicated. Arabic transliterations follow the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES), using simplified transliterations without diacritics.

<sup>1</sup> Baya Hocine recounts these school reports in her prison diary February 1957-April 1958. Service Historique de l’Armée de Terre / Service historique de la défense (SHAT/SHD): 1 H 1246.

booed and shouted down by male deputies.<sup>2</sup> The incident created a small scandal: how could these men so disrespect such a well-known figure of the anti-colonial resistance? The Family Code was nevertheless passed in 1984, by which time Baya Hocine had already resigned from the National Assembly and the party of the FLN. In May 2000, Baya Hocine died abroad. When her body was repatriated, no official delegation awaited her, just a group of her former cellmates and sisters-in-arms, dismayed by the government's indifference.<sup>3</sup> The state nevertheless tried to redeem itself by renaming a university hall of residence in the Bab Ezzouar area of Algiers the *Cité universitaire Baya Hocine* in honor of the war veteran simultaneously celebrated and forgotten.

The focus of this paper is a small group of Algerian women with similar trajectories to that of Baya Hocine. These women, born when Algeria was still French, were amongst the rare "French Muslim" girls—to use colonial terminology—to have attended French schools in colonial Algeria. In 1954, the year the War of Independence began, 91 per cent of the "French Muslim" population in Algeria was illiterate, and only 4.5 per cent of "French Muslim" women could read and write.<sup>4</sup> The FLN's female urban bombers (*fida'iyat* in Arabic) who participated in the "Battle of Algiers" between January and October 1957 were largely drawn from this group of educated, francophone young women who dressed in "Western" clothes. They became part of the minority of women who physically bore arms for the FLN's *Armée de Libération nationale* (ALN) during the war—the massive contribution of Algerian women to the Independence struggle being instead overwhelmingly in civilian networks which hid, fed and cared for male urban guerrillas and rural *maquisards*. By autumn 1957, nearly all of the women in the bomb network had been captured by the French army. The "Battle of Algiers" was largely over, a military victory for the French, but a highly damaging exercise in terms of the image of the French army and colonial rule on the international stage. Often tortured and tried by military courts, these women received heavy prison sentences. Six, including Baya Hocine, were given the death penalty, although no woman was executed.

The subject of intense interest both in France and Algeria during the war, these urban bombers are today the best-known *mujahidat* (women resisters) in Algeria. Ninety-seven per cent of the 336,784 war veterans officially recognized by the Ministry of Mujahidin (Ministry of War Veterans) are men—this small percentage of women no doubt reflecting the predominantly military criteria for gaining war veteran status, which tends to exclude the kinds of wartime roles accomplished by a largely female civilian population.<sup>5</sup> After 1962, many of the *mujahidat* of the "Battle

---

<sup>2</sup> The 1984 Family Code, based on a conservative interpretation of *shari'a* law, legally obliged women to obey their husbands, fixing in law repudiation and polygamy for men and severely reducing the grounds upon which women could demand divorce. Until 1984, Algerian family law had been a mixture of French civil code and interpretations of Muslim law and, thus, was very much dependant on the individual judge's subjectivity. This was especially so after 1975, when a law was passed canceling all colonial law, thus terminating the 1962 transition law that provided provisional continuity of colonial legislation.

<sup>3</sup> Malika El Korso, "Femmes au combat" (paper presented at a Roundtable Discussion in Honour of Baya Hocine, Algeria, Algiers, 17 June 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Thirteen per cent of men were literate. Djamilia Amrane, *Les Femmes Algériennes dans la guerre* (Paris, 1991), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Of the 10,949 women officially recognized, 82 per cent are registered as members of

of Algiers” worked for the new Algerian state, either in the civil service or as one of the few female deputies in the National Assembly; others became journalists, lawyers, or medical professionals. To put this in context, in 1966, only 1.82 per cent of women in Algeria were in paid employment.<sup>6</sup>

Both during the colonial period and after Independence, in different ways and for different reasons, these women have been part of both a privileged minority and a discriminated against mass. Whilst the trajectories of these women are clearly exceptional, a consideration of how this group of *mujahidat* have constructed their identity—born under French colonialism to grow old under the single party regime of the FLN—is highly revealing of the contradictions of two Republics: the *République française* and the *République démocratique et populaire d’Algérie*. This paper begins by considering the relationship between these “French Muslim” women and the French colonial state: a relationship characterized on both sides by a chasm between the image and reality of what the “Other” represented. The second part of this paper examines how Algerian post-colonial identity was constructed against France linguistically, culturally and historically, and the problems and opportunities that this presented for the *mujahidat* of the urban bomb network. Finally, this paper looks at the reopening of the debate in 2000 on the use of torture by the French army during the War of Independence and how this revealed cracks in previous constructions of identity. This paper is based on extensive interviews with eleven women who were part of the Algiers bomb network and who participated in the “Battle of Algiers” through planting bombs, gathering intelligence or transporting arms, medicine and messages. This was part of a wider oral history project that I carried out between 2005 and 2007, interviewing women in rural and urban areas who undertook a range of roles during the independence struggle.<sup>7</sup>

---

the civilian population who supported the FLN/ALN; 16 per cent were in *maquis* units (where they were generally nurses) and only two per cent are registered as *fida’iyat*: Amrane, *Les Femmes algériennes dans la guerre*, 225-227.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Lippert, “Algerian Women’s Access to Power: 1962-1985,” in *Studies in Power and Class in Africa*, ed. Irving Leonard Markovitz (New York, 1987), 222. In 1975, it was estimated that only 3.2 per cent of Algerian women above the age of fifteen were economically active, one of the lowest proportions in the Arab world: Willy Jansen, “The Economy of Religious Merit: Women and Ajr in Algeria,” *Journal of North African Studies* 9:4 (2004), 4. More recent figures estimate that between 15 and 20 per cent of Algerian women are in paid employment: see “Le taux d’emploi des femmes en Algérie reste faible,” *Algérie-dz.com* [from *El Watan*], December 26, 2006, <http://www.algerie-dz.com/article7604.html> and “L’emploi des femmes en Algérie,” *Algérie-dz.com* [from *Nouvelle République*], 17 February 2007, <http://www.algerie-dz.com/article8304.html>. Women in Algeria today are visible in political and economic life, but both these areas continue to be male-dominated.

<sup>7</sup> This oral history work was supported by a variety of other sources, including documents at the *Service historique de l’armée de terre* (SHAT, which has since become part of the *Service historique de la Défense*, SHD) in Paris, the *Centre des archives d’outre-mer* (CAOM) in Aix-en-Provence, the National Archives in Algeria and the U.K. National Archives, as well as a wide-ranging survey of Algerian press titles available at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* (BNF). In total, I interviewed thirty female veterans. I also carried out a survey of ninety-five students at a teacher training college in Algiers on their attitudes towards the war, veterans, the teaching of history and the transmission of memory.

“French Muslim” women and the colonial state: interactions and misrepresentations

The main reason why so few “French Muslim” girls were educated in state-run (public) schools under the colonial administration was because not enough places were made available. Prior to the Second World War, rejecting the French education system was widely considered a form of resistance by the colonized population, but by 1954 this was a less popular attitude. Indeed, for the majority of women whom I interviewed who went on to participate in the “Battle of Algiers,” this French education went hand-in-hand with an anti-colonial education at home. These interviewees came from families in which nationalist ideas of various inspirations already circulated: fathers, uncles or older brothers were members of the *Parti du Peuple Algérien* (PPA), or inspired by the “*ulama*,” the association of Muslim theologians, or indeed anti-imperial Marxists. The fact that these girls had access to education was often—but not always—the result of their family having relative material comfort compared to the rest of the impoverished colonized population. Among my interviewees, few were as middle class as law student and urban bomber Zohra Drif, whose father was a local *qadi* (judge of “indigenous affairs”), but their fathers were often the owners of a grocery shops, bakeries or *hammams* (public baths), government clerks, or even employees of the gendarmerie.

This dual education, French colonial and Algerian nationalist, demonstrates the failure of French attempts to prolong its domination through assimilation—because, of course, with their French education and culture, European dress and in many cases relative material comfort, these women should have been amongst the most “assimilated” members of the female colonized population. Indeed, they perhaps should have been even more loyal to *Algérie française* than their male counterparts: from 1958 onwards, one of the key strands of the French government’s “pacification” policy in Algeria was a direct appeal to “French Muslim” women of all social strata, with the message that becoming “more French” would emancipate them from the weight of tradition and religious law. This campaign to win hearts and minds included organizing literacy classes in remote villages, allowing Muslim women to vote for the first time in 1958, placing them under the jurisdiction of French marriage law in 1959 rather than the Muslim “personal status”<sup>8</sup> and even staging a public unveiling of a few women in the centre of Algiers in May 1958. In terms of contemporary echoes, the idea that young Muslim women are more easily integrated into the French Republican model than their violent, disaffected brothers seems not to have lost any of its force within either the French political class or the media. This seems evident in gendered representations of the *banlieue*, and it is perhaps not by chance that upon his election as president in 2007 Nicolas Sarkozy appointed Fadela Amara, the founder of *Ni putes ni soumises*, to the post of Secretary of State for Urban Policy and chose Rachida Dati, whose brothers have had frequent run-ins with the law, to be the first Minister of Justice of Maghrebi origin.<sup>9</sup> During the Algerian War, this attempt to win over the Muslim population through women seems to have met with little success. It

---

<sup>8</sup> The *statut personnel*, dating from 1865, was a separate civil code for Muslim subjects based on French and state-appointed judges’ (*qadis*) interpretation of Muslim law and “tradition”.

<sup>9</sup> For more on contemporary constructions of Muslim men and women in France, see Nacira Guénif-Souilamas, “The Other ‘French Exception’: Virtuous Racism and the War of the Sexes in Postcolonial France,” *French Politics, Culture and Society* 24:3 (2006): 23-41.

nevertheless prompted the FLN to respond with its own propaganda, promoting the message that women's emancipation would only come with the liberation of Algeria from the colonial yoke.<sup>10</sup>

Both archival evidence and the memoirs of French army officers reveal that the French authorities had difficulty coming to terms with the idea that these apparently Europeanized young women, commonly referred to as “*évoluées*,” could turn against them. Colonel Yves Godard was involved in the capture of Zohra Drif in 1957, a moment subsequently immortalized on film in Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). In 1961, as a negotiated peace seemed increasingly likely, Godard joined the extreme right-wing *Organisation de l'armée secrète* (OAS), determined to maintain *Algérie française* at all costs. Condemned to death by a French court, and then amnestied in 1968, Godard ended his days in Belgium, where he also wrote his 1972 memoirs. It is clear from these memoirs that Godard cannot understand how Drif, whom he describes as an attractive, French-educated young woman, could get mixed up with the “bandits” of the FLN. He states that with her European dress and appearance she could easily pass for “the daughter of a colonist” and blames a few stupid remarks about her Arab name from European students at her law school for pushing her into clandestine activity—as if her engagement was some kind of unfortunate mistake.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this French stereotype of the pro-French “emancipated Muslim woman” was exploited by the FLN, who deliberately chose European-looking young women to plant a number of bombs as well as gather intelligence.

Yet the nationalist education which these young women received at home and the colonial injustices to which they were witness did not simply nullify their French education. On the contrary, their anti-colonialism could be inspired by their knowledge of French history. Baya Hocine kept a diary whilst incarcerated in the infamous Barberousse prison in Algiers in 1957. In one entry she writes:

Even when I was very young I already knew the principles established by the French Republic of 1789, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, which have dominated the political and social landscape. Moreover, the history lessons that I received at school clearly showed me that nationalist and revolutionary movements were in no way considered subversive. On the contrary, all my textbooks spoke of those who wished to shake off the yoke of foreign domination with admiration and respect.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond the textbooks, teachers clearly played a key role shaping the values and ideas that they passed onto their students. Whilst many incongruously drummed into their pupils the history of “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois,” a minority of teachers became critical of colonial impositions and expressed this in the way they taught. Indeed, one of the seven FLN women bombers condemned to death was Jacqueline Guerroudj, a French primary school teacher.<sup>13</sup> For all of these women educated in “French

---

<sup>10</sup> On this battle to win hearts and minds see Ryme Seferdjeli, “Fight with us, women, and we will emancipate you: France, the FLN and the Struggle over Women in the Algerian War of National Liberation 1954-1962” (Ph.D. diss., London School of Economics, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Yves Godard, *Les Trois Batailles d'Alger*, Tome I: *Les paras dans la ville* (Paris, 1972), 340-341.

<sup>12</sup> SHAT/SHD 1 H 1246/D2.

<sup>13</sup> Jacqueline Guerroudj, interview by author, Algiers, December 15 and 19, 2005. See

Republican values,” the treatment which they were subjected to by French army torturers came as a shock. Zohra Drif told me, “We were extremely idealistic; we fought France without fighting “France.” We told ourselves that this was the birthplace of the Rights of Man. But that wasn’t what we saw on the ground.”<sup>14</sup>

Relations between these women and the colonial French state were thus characterized on both sides by a chasm between the image and the reality of what the “Other” represented. For the French state, these European-dressing, French-educated *évoluées* should have been good collaborators. For these young women, their admiration for France’s Enlightenment intellectuals and Republican struggles sunk into the horror of the French colonial abuses which they had experienced or witnessed first hand, and perhaps for the first time given their often privileged upbringing. Yet for the *mujahidat*, Independence was not about rejecting everything that originated from France. Whilst they refused to be assimilated into the colonial system, they had assimilated French liberal ideas. These women hoped Independent Algeria would be a country that put into action the Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Human Rights which remained empty phrases for “French Muslims” under colonialism. Unfortunately, French colonialism left a poisonous legacy, particularly for Algerian women, by indelibly associating secular law and women’s rights with the taint of colonial imposition.

#### Constructing the post-colonial identity: conflict and contradictions

Upon Independence in 1962, a key priority for the leaders of the FLN who successfully took power was to construct a history and identity to legitimize them and their newly independent Algeria. This was no easy task. In the words of Algerian psychiatrist Khaled Benmiloud, writing in the newspaper *Révolution Africaine* on 1 February 1964, Algerians knew what they no longer were, but did not have a clear idea of who they were. As a result, official history and identity was in many ways constructed as the antithesis of what “France” was perceived to represent—linguistically, culturally and historically. Algerian official history positioned the War of National Liberation as the zenith of 132 years of continuous struggle against the colonial invader, a war “by the people, for the people,” a people whose interests would be represented by war veteran leaders in the single-party state of the FLN.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the FLN enshrined into the Algerian constitution the famous expression of cultural anti-colonialism of Abdelhamid Ben Badis, the founder of the 1930s religious reformist movement, the “*ulama*”: “Arabic is my language; Algeria is my country; Islam is my religion.” In 1963, Islam was declared the state religion and Arabic the national language. A program of Arabicizing all national institutions, and

---

also her autobiography *Des Douars et des prisons* (Alger, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Zohra Drif, interview by author, Algiers, 11 June 2005.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth defining what “FLN” means in post-independence Algeria. The FLN has evolved from a wartime coalition of anti-colonialists (1954-1962), to the *parti unique* in post-independence Algeria and has remained, even after the introduction of political pluralism in Algeria in the late 1980s, a dominant political force. The FLN is not just a political party, but forms part of the state apparatus. It is a fundamental element of what many Algerians pejoratively term *le pouvoir*, a politico-military regime incorporating a complex web of army generals, politicians and businessmen, monopolizing power and exchanging privileges, favors and shady deals in order to keep a stranglehold on power.

in particular the education system, was embarked upon. The construction of this new identity would both privilege and discriminate against the *mujahidat* of the “Battle of Algiers,” who in turn took advantage its opportunities and resisted its constraints.

For one veteran whom I interviewed, Malika Koriche, restoring the prestige of the Arabic language after 132 years of French denigration was one of the most important consequences of Independence.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, many *mujahidat* criticize the single-minded and aggressive way in which Arabicization was carried out. Imposing Arabic as the sole national language excluded a large minority of Algerians who were not Arabophone—Tamazight (Berber) is the first language spoken in Kabylie, the Aurès Mountains and amongst the Tuaregs in southern Algeria. Furthermore, Arabicization linguistically dispossessed many of the men and women educated under the colonial system who had fought for Independence: they spoke dialectical Arabic but read and wrote in French. One of the women war veterans I interviewed showed me her war medals but then explained that she could not read the inscriptions, as they were written in classical Arabic. Other women veterans had to learn classical Arabic. So of course did male veterans, but the language issue perhaps affected more women than men. During the colonial period, both boys and girls attended forms of the *madrassa*, Qur’anic schools either privately run by the “*ulama*” (*madrassa musliha*) or the French-run “indigenous schools” (*madrassa rasmiyya*), where they would learn classical Arabic through reciting the Qur’an—but boys were more likely to be sent to these schools than girls.

Newspapers in the early years of Independence reveal that the preoccupying question of defining the “Algerian identity” was often posed in terms of the place that women should have in the new Algerian society and that this debate was inevitably entwined with the growing conflict between reactionary and progressive interpretations of the new state religion. Since the French invasion in 1830, conserving the private sphere—and the women who lived in it—from the eyes and influence of the colonizers had been considered a form of cultural resistance.<sup>17</sup> Yet we have seen that some “French Muslim” women had already begun to occupy the public sphere before the War of Independence by going to school and university. Moreover, during the war, through their active support for the FLN, rural and urban women of all social classes entered into the public space *en masse*, taking on new roles and responsibilities. The official discourse of the FLN was that, having fought alongside men to achieve Independence, women’s contribution was needed to build the (proclaimed) socialist state. In a speech in March 1963, the first Algerian president, Ahmed Ben Bella, declared, “Women have already assumed their full and entire responsibilities. It would be a dishonor to forget [these women] today. We will block the path of false doctrines and destroy the false preachers of Islam and Arabism.”<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Malika Koriche, interviews by author, Algiers, 18, 21 and 22 December 2005.

<sup>17</sup> See Julia Clancy-Smith’s article “Islam, Gender and the Making of French Algeria, 1830-1962,” in *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialisms*, ed. Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda (Charlottesville and London, 1998), pp. 154-174.

<sup>18</sup> *El Moudjahid*, 23 March 1963. Situating this speech in its context, it is worth underlining that Ben Bella attacks “false preachers” of Islam and Arabism, rather than criticizing policy to promote an Arab-Islamic identity—which he himself supports. This speech is a direct attack on challenges from the “*ulama*” to dominate post-independence politics. The speech thus might be seen less as a statement on gender

Yet whilst such speeches seemed to suggest a new era for gender relations, there were many men who wished nothing more than for the *mujahidat* to “go back to their pots and pans” after 1962. Zhor Zerari, a member of the Algiers bomb network who had been arrested, tortured and imprisoned in 1957, was brusquely expelled from a FLN meeting just after her release from prison in July 1962. On the eve of the official declaration of Independence, a soldier threatened to shoot her if she did not leave the meeting and “go back with the women.”<sup>19</sup> The typical criticism of women who demanded social mixing between men and women and equal rights was, rather unsurprisingly, that they were “Westernized” or “un-Islamic.”

In an attempt to contain both progressive and reactionary elements, the FLN discourse on women remained abstract and often vague, leading to few concrete measures and many contradictions. In 1963 the nationality law was passed, a measure which prevented women from automatically transmitting their Algerian nationality to their children. This measure targeted mixed marriages between an Algerian woman and a non-Algerian man.<sup>20</sup> Yet simultaneously, one of the best-known women of the “Battle of Algiers,” Djamila Bouhired, the subject of numerous songs and a film by Egyptian director Youssef Chahine,<sup>21</sup> married her French lawyer, Jacques Vergès, and had two children with him.<sup>22</sup> In 1963 and 1964, heroines of the revolution such as Djamila Bouhired, Zohra Drif and Djamila Boupacha were traveling the world as official representatives of the FLN: symbols of the youthfulness and modernity of the Algerian revolution. Yet Djamila Bouhired’s state visit to Kuwait caused a scandal amongst Algerian traditionalists. Bouhired had descended from the plane with her hair uncovered, apparently provoking the Kuwaiti Minister of Education to tell the waiting delegation of teachers to take their *hijab* off.<sup>23</sup> Disgusted by what he saw as the growing debauchery of society, Cheikh Abdellatif Soltani, a member of the “*ulama*” association before 1954, who had rallied to the FLN during the war, formed *Al Qiyam* (the values) in 1963. Even though President Houari Boumediene banned *Al Qiyam*, the influence of Islamist trends on policy formulation and legislation was growing, and the adoption of the 1984 Family Code under President Chadli Bendjedid might be seen as a key expression of this.<sup>24</sup>

---

relations and more a reflection of internal power struggles. It does, however, echo a progressive trend present in the first years of independence.

<sup>19</sup> Zhor Zerari, interview by author, Algiers, 21 December 2005. See also her interview in *El Watan*, 24 March 2005.

<sup>20</sup> In *shari’a* a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman, but a non-Muslim man cannot marry a Muslim woman. At the time the nationality law was passed, the Algerian state was also worried about “foreign infiltration” through interethnic marriage.

<sup>21</sup> *Jamila al-Jazairiya* (Jamila the Algerian) (Egypt, 1958)

<sup>22</sup> In an interview in 1984, Djamila Bouhired asserted that she would not have married Jacques Vergès if he had not agreed to convert to Islam. Interview reproduced in *Al’adath al-’arabi wa-l-duwali*, 24 November 2002. The claim that wine and pork-loving Jacques Vergès converted to Islam is considered laughable by one of his friends interviewed in a recent documentary about the controversial lawyer’s life. Barbet Schroeder, *L’Avocat de la terreur*, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* (New Haven, 2007), 78.

<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that the delay in the passing of an Algerian Family Code contrasts with the situation in Morocco and Tunisia, which both became independent from



The Family Code has generated a significant literature<sup>25</sup> and the role of the *mujahidat* of the “Battle of Algiers” in the front line of protests, declaring loudly that this was not the kind of Algeria that they had fought for, is well documented. Djamila Amrane, a former combatant in the FLN of European origin and author of a number of works on the *mujahidat*, argues, “There is a clear continuity between those women who took part in the armed struggle for independence and the women who now demonstrate in the streets against intolerance and the right to live in peace in different ways, the mark of a constantly developing Algeria.”<sup>26</sup>

It is worth nuancing this frequently reproduced image of the *mujahida*. First, the female veterans demonstrating in the streets in the 1980s against the Family Code and in the 1990s against Islamic fundamentalism were, in their vast majority, from the educated elite who participated in the “Battle of Algiers.” Many of the rural women whom I have interviewed did not know what the Family Code was. Second, amongst this urban, educated minority of veterans, there were divisions about what tactics to use to oppose the code, and indeed not all of these women became involved in protests. Djamila Boupacha, who became an international *cause célèbre* from 1959 onwards after her story of torture and rape was publicized by Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir,<sup>27</sup> provides a pertinent example of this. When I asked her whether she participated in demonstrations against the Family Code she replied that she had not, but that her husband, a deputy in the Algerian National Assembly at the time, had defended women’s rights. She alluded to a passage in the Qur’an where it is said that men can only have more than one wife if he can treat each woman equally, which Boupacha says is impossible—hinting that a true interpretation of religious teachings would render polygamy impossible.<sup>28</sup> This is clearly a very different argument to that of secular feminists opposed to religion playing any role in determining family law. Third, for educated, urban women it could be argued that the Family Code has relatively little practical impact—these women tend to choose their husbands freely and negotiate equitable relationships with them. This is not to deny that, if these relationships were to break down, they would find themselves the potential victims of discriminatory legislation—but they would also be more likely to have the intellectual and material means to defend themselves and a family ready to aid them.

The Family Code, for the vocal minority of urban, educated *mujahidat* involved in campaigning against it, is thus both a symbol and concrete example of

---

France in 1956. In Tunisia, President Habib Bourguiba immediately imposed a top-down legal reformulation of family law, outlawing polygamy, repudiation and recognizing maternal descent. In Morocco in 1957, King Mohamed V implemented a code based on a conservative reading of *shari’a* (modified in 2003). There was clearly no senior figure Algeria with the political will to opt for a Bourguiba-style approach, but at the same time there was enough internal resistance to prevent the imposition of the Moroccan option for 22 years (1962-1984).

<sup>25</sup> Two recent monographs are Lucie Pruvost, *Femmes d’Algérie: Société, famille et citoyenneté* (Algiers, 2002) and Mounira Charrad, *States and Women’s Rights: The Making of Post-Colonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco* (Berkeley, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Amrane, “Women and Politics in Algeria from the War of Independence to Our Day,” *Research in African Literatures* 30:3 (1999): 62-77.

<sup>27</sup> Simone de Beauvoir and Gisèle Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962)

<sup>28</sup> Djamila Boupacha, interview by author, Algiers, 11 June 2005.

unjust legislation reflecting a broader range of inequalities. These *mujahidat* are not the women most affected by its measures. Instead it is a symbol of a certain betrayal by former brothers-in-arms, a painful, codified rejection of their equal status as combatants. The Family Code is also convenient shorthand for some *mujahidat* for referring to a much wider debate about the exclusion of women that is not just based in law but in society at large, and the failure of the state since 1962 to have a real project for society.

As the above quote from Djamila Amrane suggests, in the competing interpretations of what the War of Independence should signify, these women war veterans have come to be seen, particularly in Europe and North America, as guardians of a certain image of Algeria: in favour of a democratic and tolerant society in which men and women can live and work alongside each other. Whilst the *Front Islamique du Salut* (Islamic Salvation Front, FIS) in the 1980s and 1990s tried to position itself as legitimate heir—the FI(L)S—of the War of Independence, continuing the struggle to purify Algeria of all non-Islamic influences against an FLN/*pouvoir*<sup>29</sup> which had become corrupt and illegitimate,<sup>30</sup> many of the *mujahidat* hoped for something quite different in 1962. When I asked them what they fought for, they all talk about education, an improvement in the quality of life, throwing off tutelage. As Zohra Drif put it, “being ourselves, not having to judge ourselves by a reference.”<sup>31</sup> When this *mujahida* says this, she is talking about not having to judge herself by a colonial reference. Yet one might well suspect that she does not want to have to judge herself by an Islamist code of behavior either. It is significant that many of the women whom I have interviewed talk about the veil as it has been widely worn in Algeria since the 1980s as a foreign importation from Iran (*hijab*) and Saudi Arabia (*chador*)—the white veil and small triangle of cloth over the face (*haik*) traditionally worn in parts of Algeria is in a very different style.

The idea that the version of Algeria promoted by Islamist movements is “foreign” and “un-Algerian” was also a message actively put forward by the FLN/*pouvoir* during the violence of the 1990s, accusing the FIS of being “sons of *harkis* [those who fought in the French army during the Algerian War],” trying to mask their fathers’ betrayal of the Algerian nation.<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Stora has underlined how Algerian women in the 1990s became an instrument of propaganda for both the state and Radical Islamist groups—the former using women to stigmatize their opponents and gain support from the West (even though, as we have seen, the FLN view of women was not much more progressive); the latter demonizing women as the source of envy and desire needing to be repressed.<sup>33</sup> Faced with the Islamist threat in

---

<sup>29</sup> See note 15.

<sup>30</sup> An editorial of FIS newspaper *El-Mounquid* (The Saviour) in April 1994 opened by appropriating a citation from Frantz Fanon, the favored columnist of FLN journal *El Moudjahid* 1954-1962: “We are not waiting for colonialism to commit suicide. It is obvious that it will fiercely defend itself.” The FLN was stigmatised as *hizb fransa*, “the party of France.”

<sup>31</sup> Zohra Drif, interview by author, Algiers, June 11, 2005.

<sup>32</sup> This is a subject dealt with by Guy Pervillé, “Histoire de l’Algérie et mythes politiques algériens: du ‘parti de la France’ aux ‘anciens et nouveaux harkis’,” in *La Guerre d’Algérie et les Algériens, 1954-1962*, ed. Charles-Robert Ageron (Paris, 1997), 323-331.

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin Stora, *L’Algérie en 1995: la guerre, l’histoire et la politique* (Paris, 1995), 80.

the 1990s, the complex and ambiguous relationship of many *mujahidat* with the FLN and *le pouvoir* became to some extent less problematic. Supporting the politico-military regime in place could be seen by these women as the only means to avoid Algeria “becoming another Afghanistan.” The FLN could be supported for the “greater good” as the lesser of two evils.

The examples used so far in this paper demonstrate that whilst in general women in Algeria have had relatively little voice in political decision-making and have often been the object of political manipulation, the *mujahidat* have also managed to make themselves heard. In the existing literature on Algerian women, there tends to be a dichotomy between the two dominant images conveyed: the courageous, feisty woman fighter during the war becomes after 1962 the silent victim of patriarchal oppression, in her family and within the state.<sup>34</sup> Whilst Algeria is undeniably a highly patriarchal society, looking at Algeria uniquely through the prism of “men versus women” can obscure what has for much of the post-Independence period been the crucial division in Algerian society. That is to say, the separation between war veterans, both male and female, and those who cannot claim participation in the War of Independence. Indeed, one of the most striking examples of how the citizen is overshadowed by the war veteran is the way in which International Women’s Day is celebrated in Algeria. This day, 8 March, which has been formally marked in Algeria since 1963, is one of the few officially celebrated dates in the Algerian calendar that does not have an obvious link to the War of Independence. Yet for a number of years under Boumediene, official celebrations for International Women’s Day began with a visit to the grave of a *shahida*, a female martyr of the War of Independence. On 8 March 2003, Zohra Drif organized a study day for women with the title “Hopes and dreams: how far we’ve come.” The conference symbolically took place at the *Lycée Hassiba Ben Bouali*, an Algiers high school named after the young *mujahida* killed by the French army in the Casbah in 1957.

The pre-eminent place that the war veteran has in Algerian society—male or female—manifests itself in material benefits and political social power: *mujahidin* do not pay taxes on imported cars, they get free airline tickets and better health care, they have access to accelerated promotions at work and since 1962 have often played a dominant role in governing the country. Given that today 75 per cent of the Algerian population is under 30, it is hardly surprising that this privileged position is increasingly resented, especially when it is common knowledge that the phenomenon of “false *mujahidin*” has reached vast proportions. Nevertheless, a *mujahida* continues to command respect, especially if her contribution to the war is unquestionable. The presence of the *mujahidat* in the front line of campaigns for women’s rights is systematically highlighted in both the Algerian and international press. Since 1988 and the establishment of political pluralism in Algeria, a *mujahida* has invariably been the chosen figure to occupy the post of honorary president in associations which

---

<sup>34</sup> Amrane’s *Les Femmes algériennes dans la guerre* foregrounds the heroic image of women during the war, whilst concluding, “It seems that the social hierarchy, blurred during the war years for women combatants who fought and lived in the same conditions [as male combatants], was, after Independence, instantly re-established, putting each person back in his original place ... [The *mujahidat*] tried to put the war between parentheses and live again,” 262. The political weakness of women after Independence is underlined in Monique Gadant, *Le nationalisme algérien et les femmes* (Paris, 1995) and Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (Londo, 1994).

campaign for women and children's rights. According to Khalida Messaoudi Toumi, a politician of a younger generation and current Minister of Culture, when the *mujahidat* brought their support to the campaign against the Family Code, "Chadli could not pretend that it was a revolt of women on the extreme left demanding revenge on bourgeois power, or feminists fighting against misogynist power. The *mujahidat* are the most legitimate women in the eyes of the people."<sup>35</sup> The problem is, of course, who will represent the legitimate face of women when the *mujahidat* are all gone—a dilemma which results from the single-party state of the FLN building its legitimacy on anti-colonial militancy, real or claimed, rather than post-colonial citizenship.

#### The reopening of the torture debate: staying silent and speaking out

In Algeria today, current president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, himself a war veteran, does not hesitate to stir up anti-colonialism when in need of popular support. Denouncing the massacre of tens of thousands of Algerians at Sétif on 8 May 1945 or declaring at the French National Assembly that France needs to "exorcise" its "indelible" "moral debt"<sup>36</sup> is consensual internal politics. Thus when the story of Louisette Ighilahriz became front page news in *Le Monde* on 20 June 2000, one might well have expected that the FLN and the Algerian state would capitalize on the situation to remind the Algerian population of the FLN's legendary past. Louisette Ighilahriz was a young FLN activist in the Algiers bomb network who was brutally tortured and raped after her capture by the French army in 1957. The publication of her account unleashed a major scandal in French society. General Jacques Massu, who had led the military repression of the "Battle of Algiers," subsequently admitted and expressed his regret for the widespread use of torture during the war, and a number of French soldiers spoke and wrote about abuses that they had seen or participated in. General Paul Aussaresses, another key figure in the "Battle of Algiers," and his publisher Perrin were taken to court for "justification of war crimes" after he published in 2001 *Services spéciaux: Algérie 1955-1957*, in which he declared that torture and summary executions were a regular and necessary occurrence and that the French government of the time was both aware of and complicit with these practices. In January 2009, his publishers had their conviction overturned in the European Court of Human Rights but not before Aussaresses lost his *Légion d'honneur*. In Algeria, accounts of torture that followed that of Louisette Ighilahriz were very often the stories of women, which seemed to particularly underline the barbarity of the French army. Malika Koriche, arrested in August 1957 after planting two bombs on a beach near Algiers, accused General Schmitt of brutal torture, as did Zhor Zerari.<sup>37</sup> Yet despite the media fervor surrounding this *retour de mémoire*, the Algerian state did not speak out. Nor was Louisette Ighilahriz's account unanimously supported by her fellow fighters. Instead, the reopening of the torture debate revealed growing fissures within the war veteran community, supposedly the embodiment of the Algerian identity built on anti-colonial unity.

---

<sup>35</sup> Khalida Messaoudi, *Une Algérienne débout* (Paris, 1996), 83.

<sup>36</sup> Florence Beaugé, *Algérie: Une Guerre sans gloire* (Paris, 2005), 35-36; and Guy Perville, "La Revendication algérienne de repentance unilatérale de la France," *Némésis, revue d'analyse juridique et politique* 5 (2004), [http://guy.perville.free.fr/spip/article.php3?id\\_article=22](http://guy.perville.free.fr/spip/article.php3?id_article=22).

<sup>37</sup> *Le Monde*, 15 June 2001; 19 March 2005.

By refusing to participate in the torture debate, the Algerian government formed a complicit silence with the French government. The French official silence is hardly surprising—an official expression of guilt would call forth the wrath of the institution of the French army and perhaps open the floodgates to financial reparations. But the Algerian government is also uneasy with the subject of torture. This is partly because the Algerian War was a brutal, cruel war with both sides using torture and extreme violence. Internecine conflict between the FLN and *harkis* as well as political rivals such as Messali Hadj's *Mouvement national algérien* (MNA) are not subjects that the Algerian state wishes to remember in its consensual version of history in which a united Algerian people fought against colonial oppression. However, such issues did not inhibit the FLN during the Algerian War actively using examples of French torture and other war crimes as a key means of attracting international support for the independence cause. The reluctance to get involved in the debate in 2000 might well have more recent causes. Algeria is, after all, coming out of its own “dirty war” against armed Islamist groups after the interruption of the electoral process in 1992. In December 1991, the FIS won the first round of legislative elections. To stop them taking power, the army canceled the second round. Whilst the Islamists assassinated intellectuals and carried out horrific massacres of entire villages, the Algerian army adopted all the methods of its former colonial ruler—arbitrary arrest, torture and the “disappearance” of up to 20,000 men. In February 2006 Bouteflika passed a law for “Peace and Reconciliation” ensuring that none of the abuses of the Algerian army can ever be punished in court—a law not unlike those passed in France after 1962 granting immunity to those in the French army guilty of human rights abuses during the war.

The reopening of the torture debate publicly reveals the Algerian state out of step with the *mujahidat* whom it so enjoys celebrating, leaning on their historical legitimacy. The *mujahidat* who are speaking out about torture are, after all, far from being outcasts of the FLN regime. After independence, Louise Ighilahriz was part of a number of foreign delegations for the FLN's *Union nationale des femmes algériennes* (UNFA) and remained working for the FLN organization until her retirement. Malika Koriche was a FLN local councilor at Algiers town hall between 1983 and 1991. The differences between the women's and the state's positions in the torture debate adds to the already problematic relationship which these female veterans have with the FLN. For whilst these women had few illusions about their place within the French Republic under colonialism, they equally cannot ignore the shortcomings of the Republic which followed, a Republic which they helped to create, the *République démocratique et populaire d'Algérie* which has never been democratic, has filled the pockets of power clans rather than those of the people, and has become increasingly unpopular. This sense of frustration with what the FLN has become is of course something felt by many war veterans, men and women, in Algeria, but perhaps particularly so by many of the *mujahidat* of the bomb network who broke down taboos excluding women from the public sphere to join the FLN, only to be “rewarded” with the Family Code in 1984. With a few rare exceptions, the *mujahidat* whom I have interviewed do not directly express their opposition to the FLN, but their unease with what the “FLN” means today for young Algerians—corruption, inefficiency—is palpable. The *mujahidat* idealize the war period and are much more reluctant to talk about post-1962. During the war, they say, men and women knew what they were fighting for, the cause was noble, and those engaged were dedicated and honest. When I ask the *mujahidat* if they are still supporters of the FLN, their responses are ambiguous. One of my interviewees, Fadila Attia, described

herself as “FLN of 1954.”<sup>38</sup> When I asked another *mujahida*, Saliha Djeffal, today a senior figure in the FLN, what the FLN slogan “by the people, for the people” meant for her today she replied, “For me, that’s something I believed in when I was fifteen. To question that now, it’s to question my whole life. And I don’t want to do that.”<sup>39</sup>

The publication of Louissette Ighilahriz’s story did not receive unanimous support from her fellow war veterans, revealing cracks within the tight-knit community of women who participated in the “Battle of Algiers.” First, Louissette Ighilahriz broke a major taboo by declaring that she was raped, something which very few *mujahidat* are prepared to publicly admit. What written and oral sources exist suggest that rape was commonplace both in villages that the French army passed through and when women were arrested.<sup>40</sup> The women whom I have interviewed all talk about rape but will never admit to having been raped themselves, although they quite freely discuss other forms of torture. In 2001, the French documentary program *Envoyé Spécial* asked Louissette to gather together a group of women to talk about torture and, in particular, rape. Louissette contacted the women, and they initially agreed, but then backed out under the pressure of their disapproving families. Louissette was furious and felt that her “sisters,” as the women veterans call each other, had let her down: “They left me to be taken for a liar. They had promised to talk—and I found myself alone, they just let me drop.”<sup>41</sup> Violence and sex are still taboos in Algeria, and sexual violence even more so. But if Louissette Ighilahriz is frowned on, it is perhaps because she broke even greater taboo—she talked about herself. Intentionally or not, Louissette drew attention to herself as an individual, whereas the writing of history in Algeria since 1962 has favored the anonymous, homogenous mass. The select individual figures who are publicly celebrated all died during the war. Ignoring that Louissette had no control over the way her story was seized upon by the media, some *mujahidat* believe that she has submerged the greater suffering and contribution of others, speaking almost in bad taste.

#### Conclusion: privileged outsiders, negotiating identities

The women discussed in this paper have spent their lives in an uncomfortable position vis-à-vis the state, be it French or Algerian. Amongst the most integrated, even influential, members of society—because educated under the French system, or after 1962 because they were *mujahidat*—these women have simultaneously been marginalized—under French rule because they were a colonized people and in Independent Algeria because social conservatism gained increasing political influence; because the state became militarized; because the state does not want to talk about torture. Whilst these women form only a tiny minority, a study of their place in society is an insight into much wider questions of identity. A French colonial state which assumed that similitude meant complicity: an Independent Algerian state struggling to find its identity, tangled up in its own contradictions and taking refuge in a fading and fracturing anti-colonial militancy: such are the issues revealed by examining this group of urban *mujahidat*, these privileged outsiders.

---

<sup>38</sup> Fadila Attia, interview by author, Algiers, 19 June 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Saliha Djeffal, interview by author, Algiers, 21 June 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Raphaëlle Branche, “Des viols pendant la Guerre d’Algérie,” *Vingtième siècle* 75 (2001): 123-132.

<sup>41</sup> Louissette Ighilahriz, interview by author, 8 June 2005.

In terms of wider relevance, studying this group of female veterans of the Algerian War highlights the dangers of misinterpretation in contemporary representations in “the West” of Muslim women. The way in which the colonial authorities misread the motivations and political attitudes of *évoluées*, “Westernized” French Muslim women, highlights the potential pitfalls of basing analyses on surface appearances, and in particular dress wear, be it “Western” or “Islamic.” There is certainly a tendency in Europe and North America today to focus on how Muslim women look rather than asking them what they think; for example, veiled women are increasingly viewed *a priori* as suspect outsiders. In scholarship and activist literature, there is also a tendency to see the 1960s Algerian *mujahida* as a feminist symbol—but this is not the only possible interpretation of these female veterans. In 2007, I carried out a study at a teacher training college in Algiers, investigating the attitudes of young Algerians, male and female, towards the teaching of history, the transmission of memory and war veterans, in particular the *mujahidat*. There is not space here to go into the details of my findings, but the picture that emerged is one in which the women of the “Battle of Algiers” and the *mujahidat* in general—women who are often unconventional and feisty individuals—have been “rewritten” in a language of idealized abstraction, closely linked to religion. The *mujahida* has been sanctified by these young Algerians as a symbol of pure abnegation in a holy war—and indeed she is seen as sacrificing herself above all for God and a higher reward rather than for freedom and earthly self-determination. This is a very different image from how the women whom I interviewed see themselves and demonstrates how the symbol of the *mujahida* can be filled with multiple and contradictory meanings.

In conclusion, what these female veterans perhaps best represent is a lifetime of negotiation within their society. Their lives have not necessarily been easy, their position sometimes uncomfortable, but they have managed to balance the often-conflicting demands of complex identity politics. This is perhaps best summed up by sociolinguist Khaoula Taleb Ibrahim. She was approached to write an article about the *mujahidat*, which was published in 2001.<sup>42</sup> Although initially apprehensive as this was not her specialty, as she continued in her research, she became more and more interested in exploring the relationship she had with these female combatants who were, in her words, “in rupture with their society” Her published article expresses profound admiration for her foremothers, and as a small child she remembers women in her family hiding mujahidin and dealing with visits from the French army. Interviewing her, however, it becomes clear that her interest in the *mujahidat* is not simply as exceptionally brave women but as negotiators *par excellence* in their daily lives: “These are women who experienced contradictions.” Khaoula Taleb Ibrahim, sociolinguist and niece of one of the “fathers” of Arabicization, state employee and outspoken critic of the dysfunctions of Algerian higher education, university professor and woman, can very much relate to this sense of contradiction, distancing herself from accepted norms but unwilling to entirely cut herself off from what she sees as her roots. She does not just admire these *mujahidat*; she recognizes elements of her own life in a very different time:

---

<sup>42</sup> Khaoula Taleb Ibrahim, “Les Algériennes et la guerre de libération nationale: l’émergence des femmes dans l’espace public et politique au cours de la guerre et l’après guerre,” in *La Guerre d’Algérie* ed. Mohamed Harbi and Benjamin Stora (Paris, 2004).

I'm a woman of my time. I want to participate in the life of my country through what I do, by training young researchers, girls and boys. At the same time, I'm proud of my roots, even those which might seem "archaic," because they are the foundation of what I am. And they allow me to enter into a relation with the other. Because if you haven't resolved in your head these problems of identity, you cannot enter into contact with the other, whoever that may be, as a woman, it's men, or the other who isn't Algerian, who isn't Arab, who isn't Berber. [I have to] assume who I am, with all its contradictions. [...] I have to compromise with society. In a certain way, a woman like me negotiates her equilibrium on a daily basis.<sup>43</sup>

The *mujahidat* examined in this paper underline the importance of rejecting simplistic, hermetic and politically expedient versions of identity. They are clear examples of how identities can be multiple, permeable and, to a certain extent, negotiable.

---

<sup>43</sup> Khaoula Taleb Ibrahim, interview with author, Algiers, 5 March 2007.