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TERRORISM: AN ALGERIAN PERSPECTIVE¹

*Ambassador Idriss Jazairy*²

Excellence, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am most indebted to you all for giving me the opportunity to share with you my remarks on "Terrorism: An Algerian Perspective."

My purpose will be the following: first, to demonstrate that the outbreak of terrorism in Algeria preceded and was not the consequence of the interruption of the Parliamentary Elections of 1992. Second, to point to Algeria's pioneering role in promoting a collective response to this major challenge by the Arab region, the African continent, and the international community at large. Third, to attempt to challenge some stereotypes which have obscured this whole debate both concerning the issue of terrorism in general and those pertaining to Algeria in particular.

I. OUTBREAK OF TERRORISM IN ALGERIA

First, I am claiming that terrorist violence in Algeria did not result from the interruption of the parliamentary elections "the FIS" (the civilian arm of the terrorism movement) "was set to win," — which has been the stereotyped media explanation in the West ever since.

Terrorism has a long history, which harks back to the early eighties. There had indeed been an under-current of Islamic extremism in Algeria dating back to 1964, which was linked to the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt. Nevertheless, Algerians woke up in a state of shock on August 27, 1985, when Mustapha Bouyali, heading an Armed Islamic Algerian Movement (MIA) attacked a police school in Soumaa - Blinda. He killed a police man and looted the weapons and ammunitions. His group then murdered four other members of the para-military police corps two months later. This was also a time when a so-called "charity," "Daoua Oua El-Irchad" meaning "Proselytism and Guidance," came to light. It started recruiting young, usually unemployed Algerians. They were sent to train in military camps in Peshawar, Pakistan, and then joined the Jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

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On October 5, 1988, as a result of an ossified political structure, youthful unrest broke out in violent demonstrations in Algiers, which resulted in civilian casualties. An Islamic Radical Movement, the FIS, took advantage of the resulting public indignation. It propelled itself to the forefront of public life. The FIS was successful and gained control of most of the municipalities at the following local elections in June 1990.

This party then started organizing the return of hundreds of Algerian "Afghans." Its initiative happened to coincide with bin Laden's policy of redeploying out of Afghanistan his international force, including some twenty-three hundred (2,300) Algerians, to pursue a kill-to-rule/rule-or-die strategy in the Muslim world. So in trooped five hundred (500) violent Algerian "Afghan" zealots that were to become the hard core of the terrorist groups.

With their support the FIS organized an insurrectionary strike in May 1991, campaigning for civil disobedience. One of its members murdered a policeman. He was hailed as a hero at a public rally of the FIS at the Olympic stadium on July 5th that followed. Another one of these shady Algerian "Afghans" and his accomplices attacked the military post of Guegma at the Tunisian border in November 1991. They murdered three soldiers, wounded others, and made off with the post's weapons and ammunitions.

Thus terrorist violence preceded by a large margin the December 1991 parliamentary elections that the FIS entered with the slogan: "An Islamic State Whether by Ballots or Bullets."

Controlling local authorities, the FIS indulged in the systematic falsification of the electoral registers. Before the run-off election, there was massive protest. Major street demonstrations by civil society demanded that an end be put to this masquerade-vote. The President of the Republic resigned and the voting interrupted. In response to the protests, the Army that had left the political scene in 1988 intervened anew for a time, in the affairs of the State. It did so because the Republican system was imperiled.

One can distinguish three phases in the recent evolution of terrorism in Algeria: In a first phase, from 1985 onwards, terrorist groups took selective aim at the security forces, then at the intellectuals, state officials, foreign nationals and economic infrastructure. The purpose of this first expansionary phase of the terrorist attacks, until 1994, was to destabilize the State. In a second phase, the terrorist groups perpetrated indiscriminate mass civilian killings. That strategy was pursued until 1997 with the objective of "punishing" civilians for having voted at the 1995 presidential elections or for having set up self-defense groups. Since 1998, we have been witnessing a third phase of decline of terrorist activities and their redeployment as part of the international strategy of al Qaeda. The decline is characterized by a ter-

rorist resort to planting mines and booby-traps rather than to open attacks. There are also some ambushes and roadblocks manned by small and highly mobile groups in remote rural areas.

At present, two main terrorist groups operate in Algeria. The larger one is the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which is estimated to have about two hundred and fifty (250) members. It is said to be among the most active of the twenty-seven groups listed under the aegis of al Qaeda to which its new leadership declared full allegiance on September 11, 2003. The GSPC is itself split into at least three conflicting groups. It was initially a splinter group from the Armed Islamic Group or GIA, which was the new name for the MIA of the eighties. The GIA now only has about thirty members left. Both the GSPC and the GIA are listed by the U.S. State Department as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. There are other splinter groups of terrorists. In total an estimated six hundred (600) terrorists may still be on the run.

What drives these terrorists?

A distorted vision of Islam, custom-made to justify the resort to violence and to obliterate the difference between "good" and "evil." Their groups seek legitimacy in truncated verses from the Koran. They invoke, out of context, fundamentalist interpretations of Islam provided by Ibn Hanbal in the 8th Century and by his follower Ibn Taymiyya in the 13th through 14th Century. Sunni Islam limits the right of interpretation of the faith to only individuals who are serene, serious, of high moral standing and who enjoy broad recognition as theologians. Here, thugs usurped this function to justify murder.

A world-known philosopher Ibn Rochd, known as Averroes in the West, refers already in the 12th Century in a book called "The Agreement of Religion and Philosophy" to incompetent people who venture in the interpretation of Islam. "They broke to pieces the divine law and completely divided the people," he asserts. He goes on to say: "Their speculations have greatly injured the Muslims thus divided in sects and killing one another." He could have been referring to contemporary terrorists attacking our people.

How come Algeria was the country, which suffered most from terrorism in its region if not in the world?

The country was fragile, moving from a command economy to one governed by the market. This transition caused great social turbulence making Algeria appear as the soft under-belly of the Mediterranean.

Algeria got little or no external sympathy or support for its fight against terrorism in the nineties. Yet terrorism was defeated by the combination of three converging forces. Military force of course. Then people power through participation and involvement. People often expressed their resistance quietly but resolutely.

Parents continued to send their kids, and especially their daughters, to school despite death threats and wholesale destruction of schools. Teachers returned to teaching and journalists, to writing, despite widespread assassinations of their colleagues.

Finally there was the thrust of the initiative taken by President Bouteflika to ensure national reconciliation. This was known as the "Civil Concord" initiative offering lenient terms to terrorists accepting to lay down their arms. This was adopted by an overwhelming majority of the Algerian population through a referendum held in September 1999.

II. ALGERIA'S PIONEERING ROLE IN RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

This brings me to the second part of my presentation relating to Algeria's contribution to combating the expansion of terrorism at the regional and at the international levels.

The internal challenges encountered did not deter Algeria from devoting much effort to promoting awareness at the Arab, African, and international levels of the dire consequences of terrorism on the civilized world. Not just out of altruism but also because we believed, and we were proved right, that local and international manifestations of terrorism are closely interrelated.

Terrorism in spite of the high casualties inflicted on civilians in Algeria, failed in its bid to gain control of the country. It therefore increasingly fanned out to other parts of Africa. Illustrative of this deployment are the massacres of foreign tourists in Luxor, Egypt, in 1997 and the 1998 attacks in Nairobi and Dar Es Salam.

In response to the internationalization of terrorism, Algeria exercised leadership in the nineties to draw up the Arab and African Conventions against terrorism. The Arab Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism was adopted on April 22, 1998, and came into force on May 7, 1999. As for the OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism, it was adopted at the OAU Summit in Algiers in 1999 and came into force on December 6, 2002.

The Algiers Convention puts special emphasis on the necessity for African States, when fighting terrorism, to comply with some basic principles. Those of international humanitarian law and those enshrined in Africa's Charter on Human and People's Rights.

This is a reflection of the President of Algeria's commitment to these principles. He indeed expressed to President Bush, in November 2001, his resolve to pursue simultaneously the fight against terrorism and promotion of an open democracy respectful of human rights. Whereupon President Bush exclaimed: "If you succeed, you'll be a hero!"

Since the adoption of the Algiers Convention, Algeria has actively engaged in the preparation of an Action Plan to give operational content to the Convention. As a sign of solidarity with the United States of America after September 11, our Government called a high-level African meeting to adopt the Plan on September 11, 2002. In recognition of Algeria's leadership in fighting terror, the meeting proposed the creation of an African Centre for Studies and Research on Terrorism in Algiers, a proposal that was subsequently adopted by the African Union.

This Convention completed sectoral African conventions adopted in the nineties to cope with the rise of extremism. They offer a framework to address the systemic links between terrorism and other forms of criminality. These include drug trafficking, corruption and money laundering, as well as trafficking in small arms.

An integrated response of this kind also strengthens Africa's hand to join with the international community in a true partnership to provide a global response to what is in effect a global challenge. Indeed, it was in recognition of the complementary character of regional and broader international action that Algeria also took an initiative that led to the adoption by the United Nations in December 1994 of a Declaration of Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism.

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria also expressed his commitment to the elaboration under United Nations auspices of a Global Convention to Prevent and Combat Terrorism. Because of his own bitter experience with terrorism, Algeria's President was one of the first Heads of State to express sympathy to President Bush after September 11 and to join the International Coalition to fight this scourge.

Algeria's support of the United States in fighting terrorism preceded this woebegone date however. Our security services cooperated actively with United States law-enforcement agencies after the "Millennium Scare" in Seattle on the New Year's Day of 2000. This was a case where Algerian "Afghan" terrorists were involved. In recognition of our support, President Clinton immediately wrote to his Algerian counterpart. He suggested the two countries should join forces "to confront those who want to harm our citizens and resort to violence to attack our political systems."

Our bilateral cooperation in this as in other field however took a spectacular upward turn later on. That was after the two successive meetings of Presidents Bouteflika and Bush in July and November 2001 (i.e. before as well as after September 11).

Three years down the road, the State Department Coordinator on Counter-Terrorism recently termed Algeria's contribution as "magnificent."

III. A CHALLENGE TO CERTAIN STEREOTYPES

And this brings me to the third part of my presentation. It has to do with the necessity to get rid of stereotypes when discussing terrorism — for these lead to misguided policy prescriptions. There is in particular a need to narrow differences on the political understanding of terrorism and its implications regarding the definition of terrorism in general and the specific situation prevailing in Algeria in particular.

Let me first address the definition of terrorism in general. I mentioned earlier that Algeria was committed to achieving agreement on a Global Convention under United Nations auspices to Prevent and Combat Terrorism. The reason why little progress has been made in this direction despite conditions that would clearly warrant urgent action is a political difference on the definition of terrorism.

There is increasing international awareness of the linkage between terrorism and organized crime. But there is enhanced opposition in the West, in the United States particularly in the wake of September 11, to establishing a distinction between terrorism and armed resistance of peoples subjected to foreign domination including colonial occupation.

Thus articles in the January 2002 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* and in the *Boston Review* of February/March 2003 have claimed that Algeria's war heroes in the fight to recover its independence were nothing but terrorists. The old film "The Battle of Algiers" describing part of our liberation epic has now come under attack. Is it not showing, say these critics, Algeria's rebels as heroes when they were but terrorists? Suffice it for me to refer you to an article I wrote in the *Washington Times* under the title "Widening the Rift of Creeds" on October 11, 2002.

Let me make two remarks: First that France itself has since recognized that it was waging a war in Algeria and not just maintaining order against terrorists. Second that the President of France during his visit to Algeria last month shook hands with the main hero of the Battle of Algiers, Yacef Saadi, as well as with one of his aides at the time, Mrs. Zohra Bitat-Drif. They were the main freedom fighters featuring in the film. The French President recognized them as such, not as terrorists.

In the same vein, another article by Thomas Di Bacco in the *Washington Times* of March 9, 2003, and Michael B. Oren in the *New York Times* of March 16, 2003 ("Week in Review") reinterpret the history of United States-Algerian relations of the early 19th Century. Di Bacco brands Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, then referred to as the Barbary States, as "terrorist regimes" of the 18th through 19th Centuries "sponsored by pirates."

These countries had not at first recognized the United States, an English colony in their view. That was, until a treaty of mutual

recognition was signed. Algeria, for one, recognized the United States by its Treaty of Peace and Amity of September 5, 1795.

The main reason why these Mediterranean States are depicted as “terrorists” is because, not unlike many European States and indeed the Confederate States in America themselves, they were practicing privateering. This targeted the cargo ships of States with which they were at war or that they did not recognize.

Indeed the port of Baltimore itself thrived on privateering, which was an internationally recognized practice. This practice was only banned by the Paris Declaration in 1856. The American ship *Alabama* was nevertheless being delivered authorizations to privateer by the Confederate States up to 1860-65 (i.e. after the Paris Declaration). Yet even in this case nobody calls America a “terrorist regime” sponsored by “pirates.”

Di Bacco’s stereotyping of my country and sub-region is only one instance of the dual standard applied by some Western media in their value judgments as they refer to the Arab world rather than their own societies.

Michael Oren also denounces “Barbary Pirates” as being in a conflict with Thomas Jefferson analogous to the recent conflict between President Bush and former President Saddam Hussein. I have put an end to such a distortion of history in a published letter by the *New York Times* on March 24, 2003.

Let me complete this presentation by referring to differences of perception on Algeria’s specific situation and policy to free itself from the scourge of terrorist violence.

For the most of the decade of the nineties, terrorist attacks on Algeria were considered in the West as having no international relevance. It was felt in these quarters that the problem could best be addressed through opening up the political system to Islamic Fundamentalists. Yet time has proved that the terrorism, which was blighted Algeria, is not of a purely internal nature or a mere opposition to Government through violence. It is a blend of three components: an ideology vaunted to be a universal panacea — violence and propaganda.

The ideological panacea in our case was an extremist interpretation of Islam, spearheaded by networks that are themselves transnational as the GSPC has recently proclaimed. The ideology envisions one Islamic Oumma or Nation spreading from the Atlantic to the Caucasus and the Indian Ocean. This area is considered as fair game for the totalitarian ambitions of its proponents. Their attack is then dubbed Jihad. Whoever is not with them is against them. Their main targets are the overwhelming majority of Muslims who do not support them.

In this regard, bin Laden and his followers proclaim themselves to be the sole interpreters of Divine Law. They have given new strength to a totalitarian ideology they instilled in the Algerian zealots sent back to Algeria. This ideology was also disseminated through their international networks. Such was the case of fatwas of al Qaeda representatives in London, the likes of Abu Qutada, Abu Doha, and others. The fatwas provided ideological backing for mass murders carried out in other countries including Algeria.

The criminals issuing fatwas were indeed also given asylum in England and in other Western countries. After September 11 and under United States pressure that support is being withdrawn. As a reaction to the current clampdown, the networks are now resorting to violence against their Western host countries.

The third component of the terror package, in addition to ideology and violence, is propaganda. Propaganda was initially directed toward the people of Algeria. Their dissatisfaction with an outdated political system might delude them into accepting this offer of a dream ticket to an idyllic Islamic State. But when killing replaced coaxing, it became clear to Algerians that what was on offer was a ticket to hell.

Propaganda beamed at the outside world was more durably successful. The terrorists were attempting to impose through bloodshed a totalitarian system on a destabilized State in Algeria. Yet they tried to gain international sympathy by distorting the reality of their barbaric actions to make it fit into the mould of Western values. They claimed to be fighting for democracy and against an autocratic regime. What was going on in Algeria was allegedly not a war waged by a group of killers against civil society but a "civil war" as if the country was divided between pro-terrorists and anti-terrorists. The murders by groups of a maximum of twenty-thousand (20,000) terrorists, at their zenith in the mid nineties and that are now down to six hundred (600), targeting through hit-and-run attacks a population of thirty-one million would no where else be called a "civil war."

The terrorists say in the West that they were only fighting to rid the country of a "military-backed government." In fact the reality is the opposite: the military got increasingly involved in state affairs in 1992 to protect the Republic, which was being destabilized by terrorist attacks. As Chief of Staff General Mohamed Lamari said recently: "In 1992, the Armed forces opened a bracket that was closed in 1999." That was when President Bouteflika was elected as first civilian head of state. Yet terrorists propaganda still describe our authorities as a "military-backed government," a description which is echoed complacently in international media.

Be that as it may, how can one justify on-going terrorist activity by the fact that the democratic process was interrupted in 1992 when that process has since been restored?

The terrorists in Algeria welcome being referred to by the international press as "Islamic militants" or "Armed rebels" thus indirectly decriminalizing terrorism in Algeria. Paradoxically, the same press would have no hesitation in calling them "terrorists" when they attack the New York World Trade Center.

The advocates of extremist Islamist movements in Algeria have been keen on enlisting the support of international human rights NGOs. This is not to claim that there have been no human rights violations in Algeria as it was confronted by this acute terrorist challenge. Nor is it to deny that the political system was in need of accelerated transformation which terrorism actually hindered. Even when the United States has been confronted after September 11 to the same kind of acute challenge, though on a more limited scale, it has been finding it difficult to reconcile freedom and security in its response. And Algeria does not have as long a democratic tradition as the United States.

Most cases of violence in Algeria have been investigated and many have led to condemnations of the State agents responsible. The task is not over and investigations are still on-going.

Nevertheless extremist Islamists who have advocated and justified terrorist violence, clamor that the Government is the villain, focusing on the issue of the "disappeared." These are defined as people who have been supposedly arrested by security forces and whose status is unknown.

I recently received in Washington a local Algerian NGO called Somoud, which means "Resistance," that had met with Freedom House. They were speaking in the name of the families of ten thousand (10,000) or so victims kidnapped by terrorist groups and of the two thousand (2,000) women raped by these gangs and sent back, discredited into their communities. Paradoxically, few in the international humanitarian NGO community seemed interested to hear what they had to say.

One outstanding propaganda coup of the Algerian terrorist networks deserves special mention, as it is a classic example of disinformation. I am referring to the spin they have given abroad to their brutal murder of more than one hundred thousand (100,000) Algerians in twelve years. They were able to turn the tables by getting outside observers and the media to ask the ludicrous question as to "who was killing whom." In other words, they attempted to introduce the suspicion in people's mind that maybe the killings were in effect being perpetrated by the Government's security services working under cover.

Such aberrations are reminiscent of the Internet gibberish after September 11, claiming that all Jews had been evacuated from the World Trade Center, pointing the finger at a Zionist conspiracy. A conspiracy theory involving United States security services in the Pen-

tagon attack was also developed by a best-seller in France called “The horrendous deception: No plane crashed on the Pentagon” by Thierry Meyssan.

These preposterous views were discarded where the United States were concerned. But they are still vented by the media, despite the total lack of evidence, where Algeria is concerned, even after September 11. As if terrorism was good for democracy in Algeria but evil where it threatens Western interests.

I hope that our experience will finally bring home the fact that this dichotomy between acceptable and unacceptable forms of terrorism according to whether it spares or does not spare Western interests has caused crucial delays in agreeing on an appropriate international response. This belated response only occurred after many more lives were unnecessarily lost.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me say that extremism, when instrumentalizing religion, is particularly dangerous, as its perverted invocation of God leaves no space for debate. It is not clear what is the nature of the process that lets faith, which pleads for tolerance, be high jacked by fundamentalism. Nor can normal people readily understand how the latter degenerates into extremism and then unpredictably bursts out into violence. Yet this process has blighted all religions. It has to do with hubris, self-righteousness, a sense that one can appropriate God to one’s own thesis however preposterous and use Him as a weapon against others who are also His creatures.

It reminds me of Albert Camus’s “duty to hesitate” in the face of self-righteousness. It reminds me also of his “limits” to observe in actions dictated by what individuals or groups consider to be absolute truths. Indeed it is the blind faith in one’s own truth that at one and the same time leads to injustice and evokes terrorism as a response.

I invite all of you to exercise leadership in promoting greater discernment in this regard. It can help shake old stereotypes and call prejudice into question. It can in particular bring out the relevance of Algeria’s experience in combating terrorism to the challenges encountered today by the United States and the rest of the world.

Let us all remember that while there can be no liberty without security if one attempts to sacrifice liberty for the sake of security one is likely to end up with neither.