

Interview with Fatma Zohra Boukhalfa

Journalist at Le Soir d'Algérie

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I have been with Le Soir for 20 years now, since 1993.

February 11, 1996 was a normal Ramadan day, and we were enjoying the special ambiance of the month. We went shopping for bread. It was festive despite the situation. I was 26 then. I had not been well. Every day we buried a colleague, a member of the family. That was the kind of moment we were experiencing. I was living in Zeralda [a town about 21 kilometers west of Algiers], in what was supposed to be secure housing for journalists, not at home. We were separated from our families.

That day I went shopping. I bought vegetables. Later, I found my vegetables in the ruins.

Ten minutes before the attack we were in the newsroom, and then we finished our work. Usually, we gathered together to leave for the day with a driver for Zeralda. The man who made the crossword puzzle, Djamel Derraza, who lived near where we were staying, and so was going to ride home with us, was waiting for us. He was a very nice man. We chatted near the newsroom, and we were talking with Allaoua Aït Mebarek, our editor. He was drawing on people's hands to make them laugh. Then we went about our business. I was in the room where they typed the newspapers, working on a story with Naïma Yachir. She was my friend, and my roommate at the time. We were close. I sat down and started typing.

Then there was a huge explosion. It was as though, inside of us, we ourselves had exploded. It all happened in one second. It was a diffused noise, like pressure on our bodies. Then we saw nothing. We were in total darkness. There was smoke, like a black cloud. The electricity went out. It was the worst possible night in the middle of the day. Personally, I would not say I panicked. I had an empty feeling, and I heard screams. I was calm. I don't know why. Everything was on the ground, like the whole place had been demolished. I managed to get out, though I was still in the same black cloud. It was about 3 pm, but we could not see anything. There was a rain of ash.

Here in the room where we are sitting [during the June 30, 2013 interview] which has since been reconstructed, everyone was running. Other journalists came from other papers. There was a general panic. I remember the El Watan journalists who came to help us. I remember Salima Tlemcani and another woman journalist came and hugged me, and Naïma. They were deeply moved by what had happened to us. I do not know how much time had passed.

I desperately wanted to reassure my family. Some of my colleagues – like Ahmed Toumiat and Nacer Bouzaza – were trapped in our editor's office. When we saw them,

they were all black – their hair, their clothes, their faces. We said to each other, “you are all black too.” I went back in, but at the time I did not see the dead.

Some went out into the street, like those who worked in proofreading. Some were stuck in the bathrooms. The woman who ran the women’s page ran out. The firemen asked us if we were alright. We did not know the answer. We did not know if we were alright or not.

I went up to see if my telephone worked, but the line was dead. I knew my mother would be worried. I went to El Watan. They had been hit too. It was chaos. There was no one there. I found a phone. I called my aunt and asked her to send someone to my family’s house to say that I am fine. I said that I could not say any more.

I wanted to go out again. I remember I saw a girl on the ground with no obvious wounds. She was very big and strong and blond. She was dead, though she seemed to have no wounds.

A policeman named Khaled, who was posted nearby, had been projected through the air faraway, but somehow was not hurt. We did not know who was dead, and who was not. We saw colleagues with shredded clothes, but no one ran in panic. Everyone stayed. Soraya, the wife of our editor-in-chief, was crying. She said to me, “I am so glad you are alive.” We wandered around.

Then something strange happened. Samia Argaz was being taken care of. She had a tiny wound. I do not know why I thought of this. Then, I saw Dorbane who was dead. Half of his head was missing. I did not want to see him. Others did look. Somehow, I could only see the girl who was lightly wounded.

Many people died outside in the street. We went the next day to see the people in the area.

Later, they brought out the dead: Allaoua Aït Mebarek, Dorbane, Djamel Derraza. Allaoua Aït Mebarek had a good heart. He was never angry, never. He was serene. He was consulting the wire service, and he died there.

We were told to go, but we said, “no, we will not leave.” People called from outside, but no one was allowed to enter. We only found out about Aït Mebarek later.

I went to a cousin’s home and took a shower, but I could not go home. I was in total shock, but after the shower I ate. The next day we came back to the office. We were here. We were received in the offices of El Watan, and some of our articles appeared in El Watan. We said, “we won’t give up. We have no weapons, but we are obliged to continue.” We needed to reassure ourselves, I guess.

I could not stay at my cousin’s house [for security reasons]. So, I went back to Zeralda, and I was alone in the dark during Ramadan, at the Hotel Mazafran. There was no

electricity. I talked later to a psychologist about all of this. It was very hard. I had nowhere to go. There seemed to be strange movements outside that frightened me, but I lived in Bab el Oued [a working class neighborhood of Algiers], and I could not go home, so I had to stay there. Later we rebuilt Le Soir, but some people never came back ever.

The first complete edition of Le Soir after the bombing was published on February 25, 1996. We came back to Le Soir. We came back. No one would come back unless they had fought terrorism for years like we had.