Excerpt from Karima Bennoune, Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight against Muslim Fundamentalism (Norton, 2013), pp. 170-176, from Chapter Five: Growing Roses in the Triangle of Death

The Story of the Kheddar Family

Shared in honor of the 25th anniversary of the murders of Mohamed Redha Kheddar and Leila Kheddar, June 24, 2021

THE DUTY OF TRUTH

Cherifa Kheddar, Djazairouna's president, is one of Algeria's most important human rights advocates. When I meet her, she wears a gray suit and black pumps. Her hair is chin length and jet-black and she looks tired, having worked a long day before our grueling discussion begins. I receive her in the salon that Fayza's family has given over to me. It is furnished with backless couches, and low tables with lace covers. In this serene environment, we relive some of Cherifa's most difficult moments.

"My mother went to Mecca on pilgrimage in 1996. She went with a group of Algerians to see the imam of the Grand Mosque and asked for a fatwa against what was happening in Algeria. The imam replied: 'No, that is politics and we are not involved in politics.'" Why can't you get a fatwa when you actually need one? Forty days later, armed thugs came to the Kheddar house in Blida and shot Cherifa's mother and niece (who survived) and her sister Leila (who did not), and tortured her brother Mohamed Redha to death.

Three months later, on October 17, 1996, Cherifa Kheddar founded Djazairouna, along with other survivors. "People were burying their families alone. Others would not go to the funerals because you would end up on a death list. It was as though the victim was deemed guilty." Cherifa knew all too well what a difference this support made. Thousands attended the funeral of her sister and brother. "There were so many people the road was blocked." This extraordinary solidarity, likely due to the high profiles of Leila, a lawyer active in the local bar association, and Mohamed Redha, a businessman, eased their family's pain. "My mother said even in our sadness, we were lucky. I thought, 'No victim should be buried in anonymity.'" So she started Djazairouna to stand with suffering families across the terrorized Mitidja in their worst moments. Attending a burial became a political act. "In Algeria, women do not go to the cemetery for funerals. But we went in large numbers, women and men. From then on, the families of victims said, 'Our dear ones are not guilty, they are only victims. And should be buried and respected as such.'"

Though the nineties are over, Djazairouna's work is not. At the bot tom of every e-mail Cherifa sends me is the group's slogan: "For the duty of memory. For the duty of truth. For the duty of justice." Today, its members persist in their work to fulfill those duties by taking care of victims and fighting to preserve their history.

To Cherifa's dismay, and that of her fellow advocates, there has never been a thorough inventory of the crimes of the 1990s in Algeria. Here, where everyone can tell stories of slaughter, it is easy to see how the international press arrived at a figure of two hundred thousand dead in the conflict. But no one really knows how exact it is. I ask Cherifa about this statistic. "It is just a supposition because until now the Algerian state did not give real numbers." She ponders for a moment. "I think that number is about right. I think about two hundred thousand people were killed by the Islamist armed groups." But, Cherifa, like Adnane Bouchaïb, is a universalist, so she does not stop the accounting there. "On the other side, there were thousands who were arrested by the security forces, who were afterward tortured and assassinated. And there were also some thousands that until today their families do not know what happened to them."

During the 1990s, some commentators put forth a thesis known as "qui-tue-qui" (who kills whom). They suggested that no one knows who authored the terrorism in Algeria in the 1990s, and that perhaps some or all of it was carried out by the state (or through its manipulation) to make the fundamentalists look bad. Depending on whom you ask, this argument was first made by Algerian Trotskyites, or other left-wing political parties, who loathed their government above all else, or by certain Islamist spokesmen addressing the international community. The local version of 9/11 conspiracy theories, this notion was unfortunately adopted by some on the left in the West and even fed by human rights groups. As Mustapha Benfodil analyzed it for me, "The truth was one of the victims of violence."

All this has terribly undermined victims' attempts to get their history recognized and perpetrators held accountable. I am not naïve about the reality that in many countries intelligence agencies infiltrate armed groups, but, having listened to so many victims, I think it is clear that Algeria's fundamentalist armed groups were indeed culpable for their very own atrocities.

Many of the jihadists themselves made little effort to hide their crimes. "When you hear about killings and throat-slittings in a village or town," GIA commander Abou el Moundhir explained in his group's international newspaper, "you should know . . . it is the application of GIA communiqués ordering [us] to do good and combat evil." He assured readers his men only killed "those who deserved to die." There is no question that the state also had blood on its hands, but its armed opponents' atrocities were far greater, were widespread and systematic, to use the terms of international criminal law, were unimaginable.

On this topic, Cherifa is indignant and very precise. For her, legal responsibility on the one hand and factual or moral attribution on the other are two distinct questions. "The state is responsible for all whose security it failed to guarantee. But, for the advocates of the qui-tue-qui, those people have no proof." Cherifa and other Djazairouna members did extensive work on the ground during the darkest years of the dark decade. "The day after the massacres, we went to the places where they happened and people not only described the terrorists, but they knew who was a member of the Islamic Salvation Front. They recognized the terrorist of the neighborhood who was there killing."

Without hesitation, she calls out those who do not have her firsthand experience. "Now if people who were not there want to testify in our place, that is something else. If they meet the affected families, the one whose son was killed by the Islamists will tell you he was taken by the Islamists." In the small villages where abuses often happened, everyone knows everyone else's business. She recounts what local people would tell her on the ground in the Triangle of Death after any given atrocity in the 1990s. "When we go to a village and talk to a woman, and ask, 'How do you know it was the Islamists?' she will say, 'The cousin of my husband was with them and the cousin of my husband was a terrorist.' When, for example, I had friends whose children were taken by the security services, they say, 'I knew my son was taken by the security forces.' There is no confusion in the minds of these citizens."

Why is there so much denial elsewhere that fundamentalists killed here? I will again encounter this denial about Islamist killings in a month’s time in Pakistan. In Algeria, Djazairouna’s president says it is difficult to comprehend because it flies in the face of the evidence. “The Islamists here never said, ‘It was not us.’ They took responsibility publicly. There were lists posted in the mosques.”

YOUR TWO EYES ARE GONE

When Cherifa Kheddar speaks directly about the killing of her family members, the only indication of how hard it is to tell this story is that her already rapid-fire speaking style gets steadily faster, and her voice sinks lower. “It was the twenty-fourth of June 1996. I was lying down in my room. Someone said, ‘Quick, come, something is happening.’ I got up running, my sister too and my mother.” So the family’s collective nightmare began. “We opened the door and my brother was standing there.” Five men surrounded him, pointing weapons at his head. “We had to let them in.”

This was no random wartime violence, but rather the implementation of the armed men’s ideology. As Cherifa relates: “They started with their fundamentalist preaching. ‘You shouldn’t have done this. Why do you have a TV? Why cigarettes?’ For a long time, they gave us an Islamist sermon.” Then the situation deteriorated. “We lived in adjoining houses, ours and our brother’s.” First the armed men took Cherifa’s brother, Mohamed Redha, to his house. Then they came back for her sister Leila. “My mother said, ‘I will not let my daughter leave with men.’ But my sister said, ‘No, I want to see my brother. Let me go.’”

At this point, Cherifa decided she had to do something before it was too late. Profiting from the general confusion, she fled through her room and out into the garden. From there, she went to get the security forces. But it was already too late for Leila and Mohamed Redha.

“When I came back, I found my brother on a red velour carpet. But he didn’t have a red carpet. He had a white carpet. It was his blood that had dried. They tortured him for a long time in the bathroom. Then they cut his throat.” Cherifa does not falter for a second as she describes what she found, but her voice is now very low. “My mother was washing my sister because she was bleeding from both sides. When they saw I had fled, the armed men said, ‘Quick, the girl is gone.’ So they shot my mother, my sister, and my niece. And they departed.” The scene was bleak. “My mother they left for dead. But she was only wounded. My sister was wounded, but at the hospital they couldn’t save her. She had three bullets in her brain.”

Cherifa seems especially haunted by something that happened at the very beginning. “When the terrorists entered I said to my brother, ‘They will kill me.’ He said, ‘No. They will not touch a hair on your head as long as I am alive.’ ” She thinks the terrorist chief was paying close attention to her brother’s words. “As long as he is alive we can’t be touched, so they started with him.”

I cannot understand how this woman, one of the sanest people I have ever met, is able to relate this story without falling to pieces. How is it possible to transcend such a night? So I ask, “How did you survive this experience?”

“Survive?” she asks. “I don’t know if I survived.”

“A part of you leaves with them. My brother was older than I. My sister was younger. It is your two eyes, or your two legs that are gone. I was not whole for years. It was a pain I would not wish on anyone.”

Most of those involved in the attack on the Kheddar family were later killed by the security forces. Cherifa knows this because after the murders of her brother and sister, she would visit the local morgue every time terrorists were killed. “I tried to identify the terrorists who killed my family until the day when I found them.”

In the face of much of the politically correct Western rhetoric in recent years, Cherifa insists that, “instead of just battling terrorism, you must fight fundamentalism. Fundamentalism makes the bed of terrorism.” This is not just an ideological point, but a very practical one. “They will not lack recruits, these groups, as long as there are young people indoctrinated in the universities, in their communities.” She challenges the indoctrination that makes people fundamentalists, and the impunity for the crimes they then commit.

Hence, Djazairouna opposed the amnesty that was given to state and non-state perpetrators alike. It was all intolerable. You lost your family to the fundamentalists, then your loss was erased. The only way to respond was with a metaphor. “The day of the referendum, we decided to go to the cemeteries and to bury the Charter of National Reconciliation and our voting cards with our loved ones.”

As a result of her opposition to the “reconciliation,” Cherifa nearly lost her civil service job, and she did lose her public housing, which she had to go to court to recover. She still takes care of her mother and an autistic brother. Despite everything, she has regained some joie de vivre. But she overworks herself and, given the stress of contending with both the fundamentalists and the state, battles high blood pressure.

We stop talking only when called to dinner by my host family, who have been waiting over an hour to eat. Cherifa stays to dine with us on bourek, dumplings filled with meat. Throughout this friendly meal, I think about how she has described contemporary Algeria, where fundamentalist social attitudes are on the rise again. “Women will attack you and say, ‘How do you not wear the scarf? Didn’t God show you the good law?’ ” Cherifa Kheddar remains defiant. “I say to them, ‘Did you spend the night with God so you know what God wants?’”

(Citations omitted.)

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