

Algerian Media Coverage of Terrorism From Eradication to National Reconciliation, Peace and Security

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Preamble

Media do not simply report facts but they also have a responsibility and influence on our way of thinking and acting. As such, their effects on the audience may be constructive or even potentially destructive depending on their content and usage. Equally, journalists as main actors can contribute to the promotion of peace and reconciliation or inversely incite to war, disorder and hatred feelings. After all, the media responsibility in covering and reporting on conflicts zones is clearly researched by scholars and experts. Further, their role and place in troubled situations have been subject to scrutiny by military experts in order to excel in conquering the battle of hearts and minds of the public opinion. In this paper, I will try to examine how Algerian media had covered and reported issues related to acts of violence and terrorism that affected the country during 1990s with all human, social, economic and political disastrous consequences. And how, they moved from radical and extreme positions in reporting news and events to more conciliatory attitudes in their reports. But before that, it is worth presenting a brief review on the political, social and background of the situation.

Political and Press Reforms

Until 1988, Algeria embraced socialism since its independence from France in 1962, but on the 5th of October 1988, first social riots occurred that lead to deaths and casualties. The limitations and deprivations of the unique party system were to blame. Also, it was clearly observed that Algerian political system failed to meet huge expectations and needs, it cannot cope anymore with multiple political, social and economic demands of the society. As results, Algeria adopted in 1989 and for the first time a new constitution that paved the way to the creation of associations with a political status. Following was the adoption in 1990 of the first bill of information that enabled journalists and private companies to have and run their own printing press. Only, one year after its implementation, the local media landscape flourished with over 100 titles, whereas the audiovisual field still remained under public monopoly. In parallel, many political parties were authorized to operate; sparking off the end of the unique party system.

Revolution in the Public Media

Despite the public monopoly on the audiovisual sector, Algerian viewers had enjoyed for the first time watching news and current affairs programs on their unique TV which innovated with a great margin of freedom and independence from the state. Indeed, Algerian public TV offered series of talk shows with key political figures from opposition and government's personalities alike. It was a heyday for the Algerian TV. Its news programs had impacted audiences on both sides of the frontiers; East (Tunisia) and West (Morocco). This surprising success story of Algerian TV is due mainly to the new approach adopted by the reformist government to let public media managers operate in professional manner, act independently from any pressures or lobbies. It was a genuine public media revolution lead by professional managers and enthusiastic journalists. Equally, private and independent press flourished and many titles were gaining more credibility and readership. Their contents reflect vigorously hardships of citizen's everyday life, comments and citizens' concerns were aired without restraints and constraints. Another revolution in the minds of readers is getting rooted, as they were used to reading only about positive things denying to the majority of the society, the right to know and to communicate.

First Pluralist Elections

It is noticed that 1990s marked the start of a pluralism in the political arena, sustained by the advent of a private press. Algerians are excited and eager to enjoy the new political experience garnished with new parties, new ideas and news opinions that did not exist before. Thus, the first local free elections took place and a new political opposition party; the Islamic Salvation Front with religious connotation won a majority, followed by another opposition party (which exists since 1963) ; the Front of Socialist Forces, whereas the leading National Liberation Front was the great part loser after having presided unchallenged the destiny of the country since 1962. It was a catastrophe for their militants and those who are sick and homesick for unique party system. Similarly, the new Algerian political climate which authorizes for the first time, religious parties (despite fierce opposition from main political and military actors), is cautiously observed worldwide and notably by Arab and Islamic countries. In December 1991, Algerian government agreed the tenure of general elections after having reviewed elections code. The results the first round show a large lead of the Islamic Salvation Front with over 180 seats which was obviously poised to win the second phase of the vote.

First Clashes and First Acts of Violence

However, the second round was annulled following the **resignation** of the president Chadli Benjedid on the 12th of January 1992. It was clearly observed, militants and sympathizers of the winner party; Islamic Salvation Front, were not satisfied about the decision, they were utterly opposed to it. His military wing (Islamic Salvation Army) started series of acts of violence and sabotage. The Algerian national popular army reacts and the first clashes with armed groups under the

Islamic Salvation Army umbrella, took place in different regions of the country. Algeria had succumbed to the spiral of violence and terrorism, the emergency state was declared and constitutional powers were halted. As a substitution to the chaotic situation, a new body; the high council of state, was created to run the country amid series acts of violence and terrorism.

The country was under attack from all parts, the population was in disarray and it was unlikely to have a clear picture. Conflicting reports on the situation, news on assassinations and killings were on the agenda on the newspapers first pages. Scenes of violence were daily shown on TV. It was a nightmare for all of us, journalists principally were first ranked on the list of the terrorists to be killed.

The Problematic of Reporting on Security Matters

How to report and cover news about acts of violence and terrorism was a big headache for the Algerian authorities and journalists alike. Both parties face for the first time a situation of anarchy, violence and chaos and they did not know how to cope with. If for the public media, the problem was not a crucial issue as journalists should observe editorial policies and guidelines dictated indirectly by the ministry of information, journalists from private and independent press, however face a real dilemma. To whom should they refer to report on security news? How should they reconcile freedom of press obligations to report and observe state restrictions and limitations? Those were some obsessed questions to be dealt with, as a matter of urgency?

Ministry of Interior in charge of Information

In his reply, Algerian government decided to attribute solely the right and full authority to the interior ministry, to collect, check, produce, release and exclusively publish all pieces of news on security matters. Further, neither the ministry of defense nor of information were held responsible for running security news. Though printing enterprises (all were public) were instructed to wait for the approval and quietus from information ministry department when it concerns security news. But in practice, it was almost impossible for all parties to carry out properly their duties and it is mainly due to the ambiguity of the situation, the confusion that prevailed about real news, comments and how to stop rumors. It is also a new situation of total confusion that none of the parties (government and media alike) were prepared and knew how to deal with. As such, some newspapers were closed and suspended, journalists were jailed after publication of news on terrorism acts and security news without the consent from the ministry of interior. It is actually a real dilemma that journalists faced; the public opinion is crying to know the reality of what happened on the ground.

Not Whom to Blame But How to Stop the Tragedy?

Everyone was concerned by the vicious circle of violence and terrorism that affected the whole country and how to end the nightmare, rather than whom to blame; the state, national army, the Islamists or the armed groups? At this point, the media reflected the ambiguous confusing political and security situation. Thus, on political grounds some parties emerged to suggest political solutions (Saint Egidio meeting in Rome Italy) calling for negotiations with the leaders of the Islamic Salvation Front to end the cycle of violence, whereas the Algerian official authorities were utterly (in detail and global) opposed to any concessions to Islamic front and armed groups. Facing this deadlocked situation, the media can only but speculate on what was really happening but hesitate on what attitudes to adopt and what editorial policy to prone? It is admitted that the uncertainty of the political situation had impacted directly the journalists' attitudes, between those are vigorously in favor of wiping out terrorism and terrorists, those who call for conciliation, communication and a third category of journalists who seems to claim their neutrality and independence.

Eradicators, Conciliators and Unconcerned

Thus, three categories of journalists' attitudes and views had then emerged within the conflicting situation. The first category is what they were called the eradicators, those who shared same attitudes as of some politicians asking for radical and military solution or what is known all security solution, then the conciliators those who opted for appeasement, and sought and conciliatory solution to end the conflict and those independents or neutral who appeared to be keeping a low profile, even concealed their positions for the sake of neutrality and discretion but mainly for securing their personal interests. In fact, these three tendencies were reflected within the political arena; politicians, public figures, intellectuals, religious personalities as well as military officers, all most of them had adopted different views and positions regarding the conflict. In practice, all these positions were 'translated' to Algerian press in their ways of reporting and covering of acts of violence and terrorism. Through the angles of reporting, the content of articles, reports and comments, political positions of journalists and editors were clearly stated, the language used, the wording selection, the choice of cartoons and photographs also were the expression of their opinions.

The press Was the Recipient of all Contradictions

Owners and publishers had ultimately their say on their papers editorial policy which were depending hugely on their political opinions, economic strength and their links with those in power or from the opposition side. So, different political positions within the conflict were expressed one way or the other in the Algerian press articles and reports. Further, most journalists' opinions and views were reflected in their writings. Within their articles, we can find different political views, ranging from left wing attitudes, to nationalist, patriotic, to democrats, Islamists, extremists and radical positions. Ultimately, the press was the recipient of all these contradictory and conflicting views and politics regarding the situation.

Algerian Media Pay High Cost

During the decade of tragedy, Algerian journalists and media professionals paid high cost. Over 75 colleagues were assassinated by armed groups, hundreds had fled the country. Many newspapers premises were attacked, also public media facilities throughout were targeted by terrorists. I myself as journalist in the Algerian radio was detained by terrorists on Saturday the 26 of March 1994 with my family. Luckily enough, I escaped but so many of my close friends did not and to whom I take this opportunity to pay tribute for their sacrifice and commitment. Of course, the price to pay was very high if the truth, the freedom of the press and opinion have to prevail. In fact, the situation was out of control and the last word belongs to those who hold forcefully the power of the arms. That is why, it is crucial important to acknowledge that the fight against violence and terrorism in Algeria was firstly and at utmost defeated by arms. Indeed, military and patriotic forces were on the forefront to oppose and fight armed groups and terrorists who were determined to take power by 'hook or by crook'. One may ask why the media were the target of armed groups and terrorists, were they wrongly accused by terrorists of bias and partiality? In fact, armed groups want to keep silent any voices coming from television, Radio and press who opposed to their inhuman collective massacre of populations.

Concordia, Conciliation and National Reconciliation Policies

Paradoxically it was a military high officer Lamine Zeroual, who came in the mid 1990s to power as president, he first initiated the **Rahma** (Concordia) policy which calls for tolerance and pardon between different antagonists and opposition parties. Pursuing his approach of detente and forgiveness, President Zeroual adopted in 1996 a new constitution that openly recognized political parties, limited for two terms the presidency mandate and maintained the values of Concordia and dialogue. In 1999, his successor president Abdelaziz Bouteflika reinforces the process of reconciliation, afterwards having sought and obtained positive results from a popular referendum on national conciliation, which overwhelmingly was approved. Thus, the culture of peace, pardon and security took shapes slowly but after years of hatred feelings and hate. More than that, he promulgated the charter for peace and reconciliation that offers moral, social, psychological, and political compensation as well as guarantees an amnesty for armed groups. Over 60.000 applications were submitted and half of them have been treated. Also, from 2006 to 2012, 8.500 terrorists are reported to have surrendered. It is a happy end one can observe and the statistics show undoubtedly that the charter for peace and reconciliation was not a waste of time, but it has sincerely succeeded to convince opponents and detractors to lay down their arms. At this level, public media (mainly) were asked to play an important role in running a large campaign for peace and reconciliation through organizing series of debates in the presence of all parties, even those who were opposed to any conciliatory solutions.

Promoting Peace Journalism Concept

For many colleagues and scholars, this concept as a brand new one, was a utopia, rare are those who think it is a realistic one. I my humble self did not know before about it until I read it in some academic papers. Thus, peace journalism is in fact a completely a new journalism approach and practice in Algeria. When, I wrote an article in 'local press' on the virtues of this concept, many are skeptical and did not even care about it. They consider it as a naive and restricted approach. For them, this concept does not apply or correspond to the social and cultural reality of Algeria. It is clear that there is a difference in culture, religion and politics that shaped our perception of the concept. The situation was so dreadful and compromising that none of the belligerents was ready to talk, to communicate, to listen and to forgive. Peace was the last word to be care of.

Drops in an Ocean of Incomprehension

Only, violence, terrorism, assassination and extremism were key words that dominate Algerian front pages press and subsequently readers swallowed that without restraints and any questions or comments. In fact, through my contribution though a modest one, I tried to convince colleagues that there is an alternative innovative journalistic approach rather than holding to some extremist positions. By adopting this new concept, media can contribute to reestablish peace, security, social justice and democratic rules by imposing the virtues of the force of the argumentation rather than the arguments of force. I really consider that my paper on peace journalism was a drop in an ocean of incomprehension, mistrust, blood, violence and terrorism. But after all, I think it was worth talking about it no matter what effects will it have, as I was bearing in mind that may be some colleagues may consider and agree to accept and publish it in their writings.

Missed Virtues of Communication

During ten years of the conflict, spaces of communication were not efficiently favored neither democratically promoted. Each side in the conflict denied the right of the other to speak out and air his concerns. The press was intrinsically part of the equation, either as opponents or sympathizers. It was a deadlocked situation as the virtues of communication, mediation and reconciliation were absent or exist but timidly. The failure to stop earlier the cycle of violence and terrorism was at the moral and ethical responsibility of politicians who did not encourage and sustain virtues of communication and dialogue. The media could not do it alone as they were, one way or the other, part of the game, involved through covering and reporting on security matters. It was only when first of documents of concordia was released by president Lamine Zeroual that the press started to talk about the virtues of dialogue, tolerance, forgiveness and pardon.

Reconciliation, Peace and Security

Further, the advent of president Abdelaziz Bouteflika was the consecration of a long, genuine but a difficult process of reconciliation. The process took shape but without pains and restraints and the first seeds for the culture of peace and security formally launched. As such, the president Bouteflika was personally in the forefront for the promotion of the new

peace and national reconciliation charter. The campaign was then dispatched through different public and private media, political parties, local associations and members of the civil society. In this context, Bouteflika's credo was to promulgate and inculcate the culture of peace, reconciliation and tolerance within the all parties in the country. As such, he visited several times different districts and provinces of Algeria for the promotion and the success of his project. His personal determination, political commitment and physical presence and contacts of ordinary citizens had convinced a great number of those who were reluctant and opposed to any kind of forgiveness and pardon.

Examples of South Africa, North Ireland and Spain

The examples in South Africa, North Ireland and Spain etc., were cited as references in official discourses that values of reconciliation and peace were the ultimate solutions to end violence and terrorism. As already mentioned, figures show that hundred of thousands of armed groups had laid down their guns, the project of reconciliation taking strongly shape, was finally put on the right track. It is only on the dawn of the year 2000 that many Algerians started really to enjoy the fruits of reconciliation, peace and security policies. The process was unequivocally engaged through the support of democratic forces. The media was also part of the campaign in shaping public opinion' hostile attitudes and convincing those who still doubt, to adhere to the process of reconciliation.

Media Intrinsic Part of the Political System

The media as intrinsic part of the Algerian political system can only act and operate under government policies. For public media, their role and positions in the conflicting situation were restricted as dictated by political instructions and decisions from the ministry of information, the private press, however, tried to escape but could not do better as it faced threats of closure and imprisonments of their journalists. Media reporting and covering issues on acts violence and terrorism depend on the ministry of interior' decisions (in charge of information security management). So, the media was the reflect of the political positions of forces on the ground. As the conflict went through different phases, the media were only but to follow the itinerary and the pace that shaped it. Adopting a radical opposition to any political solutions because it is then decided by the government, the media have no choice but to accept it. Once, political changes in policies took place, the media were instructed to adapt itself accordingly. In the hand of powerful politicians and other forces, the press at their mercy, was a puppet, asked to implement and observe instructions. Though, some voices within the press aired their protests and concerns, express forcefully their opposition to a long lasting situation of violence and terrorism. By denouncing that situation, the media contributed to changing political parties positions.

Conclusion

Thus, the status quo policy did not last longer and the political shift was taking shape towards more conciliatory attitudes and for peaceful solutions. President Zeroual's policy was to initiate the Concordia for those who erred, followed by Bouteflika's national reconciliation process, with the direct and complete commitment of the media were the key factors that helped the country to recover from years of pains, insecurity and terrorism. Today, despite some sporadic acts of violence and terrorism, Algeria with its 2.5 million kms² and 7 frontiers, enjoys historic moments of national reconciliation, peace and security. The media namely the written and electronic press have gained more on credibility impartiality and professionalism. For the audiovisual media, the January 2012 organic bill information, followed by the audiovisual law of 2014, should be an opportunity for individuals to invest the field and marks the end of the monopoly of the public media on TV and Radio. Afterwards, the media will fully and completely recover its dignity and independence from different political and economic forces, pressures groups and lobbies.