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Education in Algeria: Don't Mention the War

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In May 2018, [Nouria Benghabrit](#), Algeria's then education minister, [alluded to the possibility](#) that the so-called Black Decade, the civil war between 1991 and 2001, could be incorporated into the history curriculums of schools and universities. This was the first time an official had described such a possibility. Since 1991, the conflict, whose mention is often taboo, has not been addressed in educational programs. As Benghabrit [explained](#), engaging with the war required “profound reflection” and a “pedagogical approach” due to the fact that not enough time had passed and that many Algerians had yet to mourn its consequences.

Algeria's Black Decade ended with a national reconciliation process, in the shadow of which manifestations related to the war were perceived as sources of division. Avoiding this division meant that

different segments of society adhered to understandings of what had taken place that were often at odds. While the authorities imposed silence to preserve peace and social cohesion, in allowing a fragmented and disputed understanding of the conflict they only widened the divide.

Education is essential in countering this situation. New generations of Algerians have a right to know about their country's war, so as to reach a shared perception of how to prevent it from happening again. While Algeria's educational system cannot impose a single reading of the Black Decade, it can help construct a common understanding of what occurred, leading to a general recognition of mutual interests in relation to a national trauma that affected everyone.



Twenty years after the end of the civil war, this process has not happened. However, the fact that Algeria's education minister went against the grain to say that it might be time to consider mentioning the Black Decade in schools and universities showed that some officials may have started to recognize the costs of not doing so.

THE LEGACY OF THE BLACK DECADE

For over thirty years following its independence, Algeria had a single-party system governed by the National Liberation Front (FLN). The FLN's development plans implemented in the 1970s were, broadly speaking, a failure. The Algerian state's ability to subsidize goods, food, and low-cost housing, which was **facilitated** by the country's production of hydrocarbons, suffered when oil prices fell in the 1980s. Widening social disparities, **affecting** the young disproportionately, would soon create the foundations of a social upheaval that had major repercussions.

On October 5, 1988, tens of thousands of young protestors took to the streets of Algiers and other major cities, attacking and destroying government buildings and other symbols of the state. The army intervened to restore order, firing on the demonstrators. **Officially, 159 people were killed**, although unconfirmed reports **put the number at 500**. The violent repression shattered Algeria's social contract, severely damaged the military's legitimacy, and undermined the regime's already meager credibility. In order to revive the state's authority, then president Chadli Bendjedid introduced major political reforms. Among these was the adoption of a multiparty system, which was **formalized** in the constitution of 1989. Between July 5 and July 31, 1989, the Interior Ministry approved the **establishment** of around fifty new political parties.

Among these was the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), led by Abbassi Madani and Ali Belhadj. FIS would soon prove to be the most popular party and included a **diverse coalition** of radical Islamists, Algerian veterans

from the war in Afghanistan, conservative urban bourgeois, and disaffected youths. Thanks to this varied constituency, it won majorities in more than half of the communal and *wilaya*, or provincial, assemblies in the June 1990 local elections,

In the first round of parliamentary elections in December 1991, FIS again did very well, **winning 188 out of 231 seats outright**. A second round of elections was supposed to take place in January 1992 for the remaining seats. However, fearing an Islamist takeover of parliament, the military **halted** the electoral process. It removed Bendjedid from office, arrested thousands of FIS members and others unaffiliated with the party, and took control of the country. The harsh repression contributed significantly to the radicalization of a large number of individuals, particularly youths, who responded to the call by the more radical faction in FIS to embark on a jihad against the state. Many jihadi groups would soon spring up across Algeria to combat what they called "the impious state" (*dawlet al-taghut*).

The Algerian civil war caused the death of over **150,000 people**, the disappearance of thousands, internal displacement of **1 million**, and over **\$20 billion** in damages. In 1997, the state agreed to a ceasefire with the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), the military wing of FIS. However, the most prominent jihadi faction, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), **undermined** the reconciliation process. It refused to negotiate and continued to engage in violence against citizens, as well as FIS and AIS for having concluded a truce with the government. The GIA's slow disintegration and the agreement with FIS and AIS led to a winding down of the war and the **demobilization** of thousands of jihadis. Algeria embarked on a national reconciliation process that took several **forms**. Indeed, the process had begun as early as 1993 with the National Dialogue Commission and the National Reconciliation Conference, which were followed by the Civil Harmony Law in 1995 and the **Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation** approved in 2005.

According to the terms of the charter, most Algerians were seen as victims of the conflict. Those who had suffered and those who were responsible for the suffering were seen as equal and were placed in the same category of “victims of the national tragedy.” Members of armed groups who surrendered within time limits defined by the charter were offered conditional amnesty, provided that they were not implicated in rape, massacres, or bomb explosions in public spaces. Those who had committed such crimes received reduced jail sentences. Members of the military and security forces, in turn, were not prosecuted.

The Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation was approved by 97 percent of voters and had a profound impact on how Algeria would deal with its conflict. Just as the authorities sought to blur the categories of responsibility in the war to avoid domestic discord and reinforce civil peace, they would expand this officially sanctioned wooliness to all quarters of Algerian society, including education.

EDUCATION, AMNESIA, AND OPPORTUNITIES MISSED

Successive Algerian governments since the end of the civil war have pushed a narrative of national reconciliation, regardless of the way this might prevent a collective consideration of the war, in the hope that the horrifying events of the Black Decade would disappear from public consciousness. In the postwar period, self-censorship has largely characterized how wartime human rights abuses are approached. While media outlets, writers, artists, and other Algerians continue to talk about the conflict, the state has failed to do so, particularly in education.

That is what made Benghabrit’s proposal to teach the Black Decade in schools so out of the ordinary. The minister left her post in 2019, at the time of the Algerian protest movement known as the Hirak. It remains unclear if she had the approval of the political elite to

issue her statement. However, Benghabrit was known as someone who sought to reform education and improve learning standards for students. She also wanted to put greater emphasis in educational curriculums on Algeria’s historical and cultural heritage. Her proposal to address the Black Decade in schools represented direct continuity with this approach. As Benghabrit saw it, grounding students in Algeria’s political, social, and cultural history was essential for consolidating the everyday foundations of peace in the country.

Until now, however, Benghabrit’s ideas have not made headway. The norm in schools is to avoid mentioning the war, while textbooks continue to overlook the Black Decade. Yet the state has also allowed a cacophony of interpretations about the conflict to proliferate throughout society, denying schools their ability to become instruments of national harmonization, reconciliation, and unity. This effective state-sponsored amnesia has served several purposes.

First, by putting those who suffered from the conflict and those who perpetrated violence in the same category of “victims,” the authorities implied that they considered the truth about what had happened a hindrance to the reconciliation process. However, this has not meant that Algerian governments have been evenhanded. All successive governments since the end of the civil war have gone to great lengths to conceal knowledge of the atrocities and human rights abuses by members of the military and the security forces. This derives from the fact that during the conflict most crimes were systematically blamed on jihadis, especially the GIA, even when the latter was not responsible.

The reason for the government’s actions was that exposing the crimes of the security forces would only have damaged the forces’ relationship with Algerian citizens. The official narrative is still that the armed forces intervened to save the country from an Islamist takeover, exonerating the forces from responsibility for the war. The government’s archives and military records are not accessible to anyone, therefore there is



no willingness to encourage a public debate over the issue of accountability. Most of the time, the Black Decade is portrayed as a conflict between democracy and Islamism. The negative aspects of the latter are magnified to justify the brutal repression employed against the Islamists.

Second, the authorities want to avoid discord over the war in order to prevent other schisms in Algerian society. During the Black Decade, Algerians, particularly the country's military and political elite, were divided over how to deal with the insurgency. On the one side were so-called eradicators, who encouraged a hard line against the jihadis, and on the other dialoguers who preferred to negotiate. Since the war's end, the authorities have strived to create a new political order based on mutual tolerance and forgiveness. This impetus has made them steer clear of anything that could revive the fault lines of the wartime years, including writing and teaching about what had happened.

A university professor summed up the authorities' reasoning in an interview with the author in May 2021. They said, "[I]t is hard for the political elite to present history with different perspectives. There is, with regards to the war of independence, a hegemonic memory . . . but that was easy because we were fighting a foreign enemy . . . but in the [Black Decade] it was brothers killing each other, a fratricidal tragedy. How do you want to teach this? There is always a fear of endangering stability and consensus."

Third, the Algerian leadership wants to avoid mention of the war because of its concerns about legal retribution. Many repentant jihadis or members of the security forces, including top generals, are still alive. Speaking out about human rights violations would put them at risk of prosecution, widening the cracks in society. Therefore, silence is preferable. In fact, many officials explicitly deny that torture and other abuses took place—or minimize their own responsibility.

While all these reasons are valid, they fail to address a broader need. Censorship has been in place for over two decades. But today more than ever a new generation of Algerians has to move forward and develop unifying narratives that can allow for the organization or preparation of school textbooks, archives, museums, events, and commemorations to remind people of what took place in a decade still referred to as the "national tragedy" instead of its name—a civil war. By burying the history of the war and preventing Algerians from transcending it, the authorities have made them prisoners of their history. They have turned the conflict into Algeria's elephant in the room, both imposing and unmentioned.

There are definite risks in this situation. A wide range of historical perspectives on the conflict are circulating in Algerian society, and these are often marked by tensions and disagreements. Families of the victims, state employees, members of the security forces, former jihadis, intellectuals, and others all have memories of that period that are selective and that may be transformed into political weapons if state-sponsored amnesia continues to be the norm.

This is why engaging with the history of the war would allow for a national debate that integrates diverse interpretations of what happened to create something more consensual. The aim would not be to impose an absolute version of the conflict that all must embrace, as there is none, but instead to examine the ways Algerians can draw on their different readings and extract from them a broad agreement over what constitutes their interests as a people. It would mean recognizing the suffering of all victims, irrespective of who they were and with whom they sympathized. In that way Algerians could acknowledge each other's humanity and move beyond an impulse to regard those with whom they differ as inherently alien.

DRAWING ON GLOBAL EXPERIENCE

Education is the primary domain through which to advance such a project, as countless examples from other conflicts confirm. When it comes to memory and transforming the legacy of war into the basis of a more cohesive and integrated Algerian society, education, particularly the teaching of history, plays an important role. Collective memories are what bind communities together.

For instance, in the western Balkans, so-called [memory entrepreneurs](#) such as the European Association of History Educators, or [EuroClio](#), have worked with local teachers in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro to examine the [role of education and the responsible teaching of history](#) in preserving the memory of the wars in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. At the beginning of the new century and given European involvement in and proximity to the former Yugoslavia, there was widespread agreement within the European Union that the time had come to address these conflicts in schools. The aim was specifically to guarantee that students would have a knowledge and comprehension of that period that went beyond personal or family recollections.

EuroClio gathered around 1,300 history educators and sought their views on such an approach. The results revealed that the teachers found it difficult to deal with sensitive recent history in their classes because they did not feel confident enough about how to handle the content. They found it challenging that students would frequently come into the classroom holding strong opinions about what had happened, often based on memories passed down from their elders. And the teachers themselves were influenced by their own experiences.

As a result of this, the teachers firmly [believed](#) that they required greater training to deal with how to teach the history of their country's conflict. Consequently,

EuroClio collaborated with them to strengthen the capacity of regional teacher associations, which serve as voices for history instructors in the former Yugoslavia. The EuroClio program was [successful](#) in this regard. For example, it was included in a professional development program for teachers in Serbia approved by the country's Education Ministry [in 2003](#). The resulting training seminars [involved](#) more than 400 teachers and around 80 history students.

In Croatia, EuroClio implemented training seminars in cooperation with other partners in 2018. In addition, teachers and historians promoted the gathering of memoirs, testimonies, and oral histories. Institutions that were focused on promoting a collective memory of the war conducted interviews with survivors. The efforts led to the establishment of the Centre for Peace, Non-Violence, and Human Rights, or [Documenta](#), in Osijek, “to encourage a process of dealing with the past . . . and to contribute to [a] shifting of the discussion from the level of dispute over facts . . . towards a dialogue on interpretations.” Documenta's material that is used in schools considers different viewpoints and is intent on respecting the opinions, backgrounds, and experiences of all sides.

The integration of multiple viewpoints and recollections would be just as critical in Algerian classrooms and would reduce the dangers of politicization of, and polarization around, the war years. This could alleviate perceptions of injustice and victimhood provoked by the conflict and promote an inclusive political culture. But that is precisely what Algerian governments have not done.

The Documenta project is certainly something that can be replicated in Algeria. With the help of civil society organizations, the educational authorities could also establish so-called [regional summer schools](#), a seasonal program built around particular themes related to a conflict. Such schools were organized in Bosnia in 2015 and Osijek in 2019. Educators and historians

from different Algerian provinces could, similarly, discuss the entangled legacies of the Black Decade and the importance of teaching what happened to a younger generation. A capacity-building component could be added to transfer knowledge and experience of the wartime period to participants. This could also include training seminars like those [organized](#) in Prizren, Kosovo, in 2014. The aim there was to prepare history educators to better support implementation of a core curriculum to teach contentious historical issues in Kosovar schools. As the countries of the former Yugoslavia have benefited from such programs, so too can Algeria.

CONCLUSION

As time passes and the Algerian regime feels even less of an incentive to move away from restricting mention of the civil war years, the price to pay for this may rise. In denying Algerians a tool for self-critical reflection on their past, the authorities will only foster new political confrontations over historical memory. However, programs such as those adopted in the former Yugoslavia could, at the least, make it more difficult for the state to impose silence indefinitely in the teaching of history. By helping to avert a fragmented, selective recollection of what happened during the 1990s, they would facilitate the emergence of a common understanding of what happened, creating a foundation for civil peace. Coming to terms with history, particularly a damaging history, means being ready to reflect on what took place in an unconditional way.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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NOTES

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