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Algeria: Civilians caught between two fires

Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed since the beginning of the conflict six years ago. It began with the security forces firing on peaceful demonstrators who had occupied the public squares in the capital in January 1992. Since then armed opposition groups, which call themselves "Islamic groups", have mushroomed and the conflict has continued to escalate. Security forces and armed opposition groups have shown total disregard for the most fundamental of human rights - the right to life. Both have increasingly targeted civilians, for they are an easy target.

If you are a relative of a member of the security forces you are not safe, for armed groups may kill you as a means of putting pressure on your relative. If your relative is a member of an armed group, you are not safe either as the security forces may kill you, or arrest you and make you "disappear", to put pressure on your relative. If the security forces suspect you of being linked to an armed group they may kill you, and if an armed group suspects you of being an informer of the security forces, they will also kill you. The fact that you are neither a member of an armed group nor a police informer won't matter, for neither will ask you any question before killing you - or if they do ask you questions they may not believe your answers, and still kill you.

Walking in the street is dangerous, for you may be killed by a bomb explosion. Armed groups often place bombs in public places which, even if in some cases are near security forces posts, are populated mainly by civilians. Driving in the countryside is dangerous as you may be stopped a road block and be killed or "disappear". Often no one will know who took you away and made you "disappear", because the security forces wear civilian clothes, use plain cars and behave like armed groups, while armed groups often wear uniforms and pose as security forces.

If you are at risk from the security forces you have no one to turn to for protection. If you are at risk from armed groups and turn to the security forces for protection they often do nothing and sometimes give you a gun to protect yourself. This policy of privatization of the conflict has drawn the civilian population increasingly into the conflict and left them more and more unprotected.

Ali (not his real name), a civil servant from Bab El Oued, a popular district in the capital, found himself caught between two fires. He was a supporter of a now banned Islamist party and was arrested in 1992, when the party had organized demonstrations against the cancellation of the elections which it was set to win. Ali's brother and cousins were also arrested and another cousin was a member of an armed Islamist group. One day some youth from his home district came to tell him he had to stop working for the government or else they would kill him. He pleaded with them and told them that with his salary he supported

his whole family, but they would not listen. At the same time one of his cousins, the brother of the member of an armed group, was arrested by security forces and “disappeared”. The security forces who took him away told his mother that her children are “terrorists” and that she would not see her son until the her other “terrorist” son gave himself up. Ali is sure that this cousin did not have anything to do with any armed groups and that he was arrested to put pressure on his brother who was on the run.

Rachid (not his real name), a judge found himself, like many of his colleagues, threatened with death by armed groups who have increasingly killed and targeted civilians. When he asked the authorities for protection against threats by armed groups he was offered a gun. Yet it is well known that carrying a gun is no protection. Many of Rachid’s colleagues were killed in surprise attacks; shot in the back as they walked down the street or in other situations where carrying a weapon made little difference. At the same time he also found himself targeted by government forces because he opposed torture and other human rights violations against detainees and because he refused to order the detention of individuals accused of “terrorist activities” against whom there was no evidence. As a “punishment” for his stand he was assigned to work in a very dangerous area where he and his family are well known and where it would have been impossible for him to conceal his profession. After escaping an attempted assassination he decided to leave the country.
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