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The other intifada

Algeria's Berber minority resists assimilation into Arab culture. After a two-year uprising against military rule, can they help redefine governance in the Middle East?

By Adam Shatz, Globe Correspondent, 6/8/2003

"WE ARE ARABS, we are Arabs, we are Arabs!" proclaimed Ahmed Ben Bella, soon to be the first president of independent Algeria, just after being released from a French colonial prison in 1962. A colleague of his reportedly muttered that if Ben Bella repeated those words enough times, "they just might come true." There was, indeed, an anxiety lurking beneath Ben Bella's mantra. For he knew as well as anyone that nearly a quarter of his Muslim compatriots were not Arab but Berber.

For several decades, the Algerian government has dealt with the Berbers, the descendants of Algeria's original inhabitants, the way most postcolonial governments in the Middle East and North Africa have dealt with ethnic and religious minorities-by attempting to buy them off, and when that has failed, by the blunt force of repression, in the hope that over time they would assimilate into the majority.

To be fair, the Algerians in power have never been as brutal toward the Berbers as the Iraqis and the Turks have been toward the Kurds, perhaps because many of Algeria's politicians are themselves assimilated Berbers. But today, it's clear that those politicians have been just as successful in encouraging the very resistance they hoped to calm. In the mountainous region of Greater Kabylia, the cradle of Berber Algeria, a full-scale revolt against the Algerian regime and its Arab nationalist ideology has been underway for the past two years: The repressed has returned, with a vengeance.

Ever since the late 19th century, Kabyles have been renowned for their military valor. But despite Berber fighters' disproportionate sacrifices in the revolution against French rule, the National Liberation Front (FLN)-the leading party in the national struggle against French authority-defined Algeria as a homogenous, Arab-Muslim state upon winning independence in 1962. It made standard Arabic mandatory in education, even though the language is spoken by few Algerians, most of whom use a North African dialect. The FLN also broke up Berber cultural meetings and frowned upon the use of the Berber tongue Tamazight as a threat to national unity.

Early last December, I traveled east from Algiers to Tizi Ouzou, Kabylia's largest city and the center of Berber unrest. A two-hour drive and a world away from the capital, Tizi Ouzou is a filthy, sullen town. The roads are barely paved, weeds shoot out of empty lots, and the state appears to be on holiday. All the signs are in French and Tamazight; whatever Arabic there was has been effaced by protestors. Grim, Soviet-style high-rises are scrawled with graffiti hailing the "aarsh" (literally, "tribes" in Tamazight), village committees that have

undergone a revival in the last few years. (Belad Abrika, the committee movement's charismatic leader, is a hirsute young man who would not look out of place at a Phish concert.)

Two years ago this spring, Tizi Ouzou erupted after an 18-year-old man named Massinissa Guermah died in the custody of the gendarmes. Within days, Guermah's death had touched off protests throughout Kabylia. Enraged youths took to the streets to denounce "hogra"-Algerian argot for humiliation by the state-and called for the removal of the gendarmes, whose presence here is deeply resented, all the more so because few of them are native to the area. But the chants soon came to embrace a wide, albeit confused set of demands that ranged from democracy (a yearning expressed by many Algerians) to regional autonomy for Kabylia, a distinctly more controversial proposition. Although it began peacefully enough, the "Kabyle Spring" degenerated into rioting and looting. The gendarmes fought back with live ammunition, killing nearly 100 unarmed Kabyles in a period of 60 days.

On June 14, 2001, in one of the largest demonstrations the country has ever seen, hundreds of thousands of Kabyles, many of them traveling from Tizi Ouzou, poured into the main squares of Algiers. Armed clashes broke out, and four protestors were killed. Since then, all demonstrations in the capital have been banned, but Kabylia continues to smolder. Cities like Tizi Ouzou and Bejaia are now the scene of a sporadic intifada, not only against poverty and "hogra" but against Arab nationalism, the state's official ideology.

For President Bouteflika, who is trying to convince the West that Algeria is finally at peace after the brutal, decade-long civil war between security forces and Islamist rebels, the uprising could hardly have come at a worse time. Since being elected in 1999, Bouteflika has presided over a project of "national reconciliation," in which thousands of Islamists received amnesty in return for laying down their arms. Since the truce, terrorism has declined considerably. But just as Bouteflika was taking credit for restoring peace, Kabylia exploded.

Ethnically, the Kabyles, who represent about 10 percent of the national population, are no different from other Algerians, most of whom are Berbers whose ancestors were "arabized" over a thousand years ago. But the people of Kabylia have tenaciously held on to their language and customs; they are especially renowned for their poetry, jewelry, and music.

Kabyle distinctiveness is also noticeable in matters of family and religion-the battleground of Algerian identity since independence. Although the Berbers are Muslim and often pious in their observance, their practice owes more to Sufism than to orthodoxy, and fundamentalism has never managed to sink roots in Kabylia. Women in Kabylia are more likely to work and less likely to wear the veil, and generally enjoy a higher degree of equality with men, although inheritance practices in Kabylia are less favorable to them than in the rest of Algeria. I remember asking a young man in Tizi Ouzou whether there were any intermarriages in his family. Yes, he said, "My brother is married to a French woman." But are any of your family members married to Arabs? I asked. He seemed to shudder at the very thought: "Their mentality is completely different from ours."

In fact, Kabyles suffer from the same problems as other Algerians: a housing shortage, unemployment, poor health care. In strictly economic terms they are no worse off, and arguably better off, than other Algerians, since they tend to be better educated and to speak fluent French, which is still an indispensable asset for those seeking employment in certain careers; they also often benefit from remittances from relatives abroad. That's why many Algerians, including second- and third-generation Kabyles who live in Algiers, will tell you that the "Kabyle problem" is mostly in their heads-that, as one intellectual puts it, "they have a complex about being more victimized than the rest of us." That may be true, but what provides the tinder of Berber protest isn't deprivation so much as a lingering perception of

cultural intolerance.

Such intolerance fostered the Berber consciousness movement of the late 1970s, which culminated in the "Berber Spring" of 1980, a wave of peaceful civil disobedience that broke out after the state suppressed a lecture on Berber poetry by Mouloud Mammeri, a celebrated Kabyle writer, at the University of Tizi Ouzou. (The university has since been renamed for Mammeri.)

Like many Kabyles of his generation, Brahim Salhi-an urbane, French-educated sociologist of 50-worries that the Berber spring's banner of democracy is being swept aside by a more atavistic form of ethnic power politics. "The Berber Spring," he pointed out, pausing for a long drag on his cigarette, "was led by professors, engineers, and lawyers who were the fruit of state-led modernization. Our slogan wasn't 'Autonomy for Kabylia,' it was 'Democratic Liberties.' The Kabyle movement was a kind of vanguard for the democracy movement in Algeria. Today, instead of protests, we have riots, because there is a total lack of political leadership."

The reason for this is the civil war. Although most Kabyles abhor radical fundamentalism, the two main Berber political parties have been bitterly divided over whether to support the military government's often brutal approach to suppressing Islamists. Mired in bickering, they have lost much of their following. During the recent intifada, young men set fire to the offices of both parties. The political vacuum, meanwhile, has been filled by the village committees, in which men from neighboring settlements-woman are excluded-assemble to decide on matters of common concern. Another curious sign of the times is the separatist Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylia (MAK) led by the folk-singer Ferhat M'henni, who views autonomy as "the first step toward a federal state," something Algeria's leaders vehemently oppose.

Like all such movements awakening to their own power, the Kabyles have produced their own distinctive mythology, based on a reading of history as fanciful as it is selective. The "autonomists" in MAK portray themselves as victims of the Arab conquest, overlooking the fact that the Kabyles converted to Islam and have long seen themselves as members of a wider Muslim community. Depending on whom they think they're talking to, they liken themselves either to Palestinians under occupation, or to "Jews in a sea of Arabs."

The irony, which few of the young radicals appreciate, is that those Kabyles who joined the FLN and played key roles in the liberation struggle bear at least some of the historical responsibility for the neglect of Algeria's Berber heritage. These men were often more hostile to Berberism than their Arab associates. As minorities in Arab society, they were eager to be accepted by the majority as equal members of Arab-Muslim civilization, and loathe to dwell on anything that made them stick out. Like a number of other prickly topics-including individual rights, the status of women, and political pluralism-Berber identity was something that could wait until "after the revolution."

One afternoon in Algiers, I spoke with Belad Abdesselam, a wartime FLN leader of Kabyle origin who went on to found Sonatrach, the state oil firm, and to serve briefly as the country's prime minister in the early 1990s. A plump, formal man with a deceptively retiring veneer, Abdesselam poured us tea in his living room, covered with oriental rugs and decorated with weavings of Koranic verses. Berberism, he said, "is a political movement that was encouraged by the French and by the Church. They came up with the idea of Kabyles being a part of the Latin-Roman world as a way of taking a kind of historical revenge on the Arabs." Still, he admitted, "When Kabyles spoke their language they were criticized for not speaking Arabic, and that inflicted a wound."

That wound finds expression today in the heated assertion of Kabyle exceptionalism. The angry youths of Tizi Ouzou seem uncertain as to whether they want to revolutionize Algerian society (the dream of the Berber Spring) or secede from it (the apparent goal of MAK). Their decision will hinge, in part, on the government's approach, and on whether it has learned from its past mistakes. For just as the ruthless war against Islamist rebels initially had the effect of creating more Islamists, so the bloody repression of the Kabyle intifada is likely to foster more Kabyle separatists.

When the intifada began, President Bouteflika, a deeply unpopular figure in Kabylia, accused the leading Kabyle opposition party of stirring up the protests to sabotage his economic plan. Since then he has pursued a more conciliatory strategy. In 2002, he granted Tamazight official status as another national language. And as he prepares to run for reelection next April, he is clearly eager to end the bloody two-year standoff. A week after the recent earthquake that killed over 2,200 people, many of them Berbers living in towns outside of Algiers, Bouteflika's prime minister, Ahmed Ouyahia, called upon local Berber leaders to join him in negotiating an end to the conflict. He addressed them in Tamazight, speaking in urgent tones: "We must find a solution to this crisis, for it could lead to a catastrophe, and become a long-term danger to our country if it persists."

Promising words, but the Berbers have heard them before and it will take more than good intentions to earn their trust. After all, Bouteflika's historic recognition of Tamazight was shrugged off by Kabyles, who overwhelmingly boycotted the legislative elections of May 2002—the only region to do so. And Ferhat M'henni, the leader of MAK, has made it clear that he and his followers will settle for nothing less than autonomy.

During my visit in early December, the situation appeared to be deteriorating. The police were dispersing Kabyle demonstrations in Algiers, and Belad Abrika, along with other imprisoned members of the village committees, was on hunger strike. Highway traffic between Algiers and Tizi Ouzou was often held up because of Kabyle protests. "If there's going to be change in Algeria, it has to come from Kabylia," my driver said, echoing what I had heard from many Kabyles.

That "has to come" is an expression not merely of regional pride but of despair about the rest of the country. My driver may be right, but it remains to be seen whether Kabylia will be the embryo of Algerian democracy or of a growing and unappeasable separatist movement.

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This story ran on page H2 of the Boston Globe on 6/8/2003.
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