

## *Khalida Messaoudi: An Algerian Woman Stands Up*

Paris: Flammarion, 1995

Reviewed by Wafa Stephan Tarnowski

Khalida Messaoudi is a feminist leader and a democrat who has backed the Algerian Government's decision to stop the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) from winning the 1991 parliamentary elections. For that, and for her critique of FIS policies towards women, the FIS has officially condemned Messaoudi to death. She now lives in hiding, with family and friends, unable to stay in one place for more than one night for fear of being discovered and killed.

During one of her clandestine trips to France, she was interviewed by the French journalist Elisabeth Schemla of the *Nouvel Observateur* newspaper. This book is a transcription of that long interview. It was dedicated to "all the raped and murdered women, to all the intellectuals, children, artists and journalists who were victims of the FIS' armed faction and to all who are saving Algeria's honor."

The book is part autobiography and part political analysis of the historical process that brought about the bloody confrontation between the FIS and the Algerian authorities. It explains, from a pro-democratic, pro-feminist standpoint, what went "wrong" in Algeria and why the country is wracked by violence and why its intellectuals, journalists, singers, teachers and students are being killed on an almost daily basis.

Messaoudi discusses in detail the FIS' ascent to power. Some of the important reasons for this ascent, in her opinion, were the state's policies of forced arabicization of education and the 30-year-old one-party system, which forced citizens to have a narrow view of history and the world, while excluding them from active and meaningful participation in Algeria's political life. Thus, young people brought up in that atmosphere are unable to perceive any dialogue between philosophy and religion, except

through the lens of Islamic fundamentalism. Hence, young Algerians (who form 70 percent of the country's 26 million citizens) have grown up to believe that Islam is a "global substitute for all ideological, political, economic and social problems" (p. 145).

Messaoudi's generation (she was born in 1958), which is that of the daughters and sons of Algeria's freedom fighters, was one destined to fill the jobs left vacant by French colonialists. It was an optimistic generation which believed in freedom, democracy and civil society. The clash happening now in Algeria is between these two generations, explains Messaoudi (p. 23).

Where do women fit into this clash, one wonders? Messaoudi devotes two chapters of the book to this question, in addition to the few autobiographical chapters concerned with her childhood and upbringing as a Berber woman and direct descendant of a *marabout* and a local Muslim saint, Sidi Ali Moussa. According to Messaoudi, the year 1980 was a watershed for Algerian women. The new president, Chadli Ben Jedid, presented a new personal status code which made Algerian women perpetual minors. Women were not to be allowed to leave the country unless accompanied by a male guardian. Women were only recognized as "daughters of", "mothers of", and "wives of" men. They could not work, marry, divorce, study or inherit without the consent of their tutor (Article 11). Article 8 of the code allows polygamy, while Article 53, on divorce, clearly favors men. Although the wife gets to keep the children, the husband remains the legal guardian and tutor. So children cannot go to school without their father's signature, for instance. Article 52 of the Code gives the conjugal home back to the husband in the event of a divorce. Thus, many divorced women are left homeless with their children, living in the streets.

Concerning inheritance, men receive double the amount that women receive. Here, Messaoudi blames the Algerian Government for pushing for the adoption of the "Family Code", despite many protests by women on the 8th of March, 1980, during the year 1981, and up until the 9th of June, 1984, the date of the Code's final ratification (p. 85). According to Messaoudi, it was only women who opposed the code (p. 92), not only that, but two generations of women opposed it: the Freedom Fighters of the early 1960s and their daughters.

In 1981, both of these generations of Algerian women

organized a demonstration against the Code. Participating in the demonstration were some of the women who once fought alongside men against the French colonial forces. Messaoudi asked these women why they had gone back to their kitchens and turned their backs on public life for two decades. Their answer, according to Messaoudi, was that they had never stopped being militants, but that their work was not public any longer. They had been busy taking care of orphans and war widows, but had grown tired of fighting "outside"; they wanted to go back "inside" the house to be with their families and children (p. 83). However, the women fighters were now very disappointed with the men alongside of whom they fought. They told Messaoudi "we never thought that they would manage the country like this and do to us what they have done!" (p. 84).

As for the most famous of the women freedom fighters, Djamilia Bouhired, Messaoudi recalls meeting her one day, by chance, in front of a store. They recognized each other. Bouhired started crying and Messaoudi became very emotional. The FIS armed faction had already begun its violent persecution of women who did not wear a veil in public. Bouhired told Messaoudi, "My daughter, what are you living through these days?! Have courage, and don't give up!" (p. 85). Courage, Messaoudi has a lot of. On the 16th of May, 1985, she, together with forty other women from different regions and various political parties, met and created "The Association for Legal Equality between Men and Women". It was permitted to exist until 1989, when it was banned.

In October, 1988, Algeria's youth, students and unemployed took to the streets and attacked all governmental institutions. Their demands were "freedom and dignity and justice, and the right to be themselves". There were thousands of wounded and five hundred dead, as well as scores of arrests during those demonstrations as a result of government repression. Messaoudi's supporters joined in and backed the fight for democracy. A "National Committee Against Torture" was founded and later dissolved. The problem, according to Messaoudi, was that this "democratization" was being implemented under the umbrella of the Family Code, which no one was willing to challenge or change (p.137). Moreover, a law adopted in June 1990 authorized husbands to vote on behalf of their wives in municipal elections. From Messaoudi's perspective, Algerian women were being sacrificed once more (p.138). This, she could not accept. Hence, she has earned the label of "radical" in the eyes of

many.

In June, 1989, a fundamentalist armed group set fire to the house of a woman living alone with her seven children because the group considered her a "prostitute" since she was living without the guardianship of a male relative. All Algerian feminist groups mobilized themselves and asked the government for protection for women. At the same time, there was a lot of dissent among these feminist groups, some of whom had decided to support the armed Islamic group's call for the return of the veil, preventing women from working, listening to music and dancing. Messaoudi's own organization was split on these issues, so she moved on to form a new organization entitled "The Independent Association for the Triumph of Women's Rights" (p.140). Messaoudi stresses that the importance of this organization is that it is independent of any male political parties. She says she is for "women's autonomous speech" and women's right to go wherever they wish (*ibid.*). The "woman" dimension of a female's identity, according to Messaoudi, outweighs all the other dimensions of her being. "She is woman before being Algerian, Berber, Muslim or militant" (p. 142). Messaoudi is a fervent believer in a secular, egalitarian and independent Republic of Algeria (*ibid.*).

It is obvious to any reader that Messaoudi is a very forceful and passionate person. Her beliefs are clearly delineated and emphatically expressed. One cannot help but to admire her intelligence, integrity and honesty. One of the most touching parts of the book appears at the very beginning, when she recounts her life in hiding and how being prevented from performing her professional role as a math teacher has deprived her of her "spinal cord" (p. 19). She also relates that not having a *chez soi*, a "place of her own", has disturbed her deeply, and how her clandestine life has transformed her into an insomniac, afraid of being alone, yet craving personal space, which is lacking since she is always under others' protection. In order to counteract these fears and disturbances, Messaoudi tells us that she makes a special effort to always be neat, well-dressed, and to present herself correctly to others. Most important, however, is her determination to remain standing (*debout*): "I must remain standing at all times, for me and for the others", she concludes with conviction (p. 22). *An Algerian Woman Stands Up* is an important addition to the library of anyone interested in the contemporary Arab Islamic world, women's rights and human rights.