



## Le dernier tabou: les 'harkis' restés en Algérie après l'indépendance

Natalya Vince

To cite this article: Natalya Vince (2017): Le dernier tabou: les 'harkis' restés en Algérie après l'indépendance, The Journal of North African Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13629387.2017.1299902](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1299902)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1299902>



Published online: 13 Mar 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Le dernier tabou: les 'harkis' restés en Algérie après l'indépendance**, by Pierre Daum, Arles/Paris, Solin/Actes Sud, 2015, 539 pp., €24.80 (paperback), ISBN 978-2-330-03908-0

During the Algerian War of Independence, an estimated 450,000 Algerians, or 'French Muslims' to use the terminology of the time, 'worked for the French' (52). That is to say, they supported in some capacity the French government and army against the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and its *maquisards* in the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN). This included auxiliaries in the French army recruited into units or roles specifically created for 'French Muslims', conscripts in the regular army and pro-French notables and administrators. This group, along with their wives and children, have come to be collectively known as Harkis.

In both France and Algeria today, references to 'les harkis' provide a potent political language. In Algeria, 'Harki' is commonly used as a synonym for traitor. 'Harki' and 'son of a Harki' are insults employed by those in power to delegitimise their opponents. At the same time, a frequent trope used to contest the political order consists of the argument that it was last-minute deserters from the French army who, in the spring of 1962, joined the ALN in droves and usurped power from the real *maquisards*. In France, 'les harkis' have long been held up by former settlers' associations as evidence of the Gaullist 'betrayal': 'les harkis' are presented as autochthones loyal to the 'motherland' who were 'abandoned' by callous politicians to be 'massacred'. The treatment of those Harkis and their families who sought to come to France in 1962, and who were discouraged from doing so by the French state or parked for long years in rudimentary camps, differed distinctly from that received by 'returning' European settlers, who were generally housed, compensated and found new occupations. More recently, advocacy groups for Harkis in France have sought to distance themselves from instrumentalisation by groups nostalgic for colonial Algeria and to make demands on the French state on their own terms (Eldridge 2009).

The history and memory of Harkis who came to France is well documented in the existing literature. A summary of the field forms the first part of Pierre Daum's *Le dernier tabou*.<sup>1</sup> The originality of Daum's book is that its focus is the majority of Harkis who remained in Algeria after 1962. The second part contains 38 interviews with Harkis and their families in Algeria (out of some 60 conducted between 2012 and 2014), along with 5 further interviews with Harkis who stayed after 1962 but now live in France. Although the book's subtitle suggests a post-independence history, Daum tends to focus on reasons for engagement (with poverty being a key motivating factor), the experience of the war and what happened in 1962–1963 (notably questions about reprisals), furnishing brief additional details on employment, marriage and children. The interviews are presented informant-by-informant, grouped together by geographical region of origin. Daum does

not proceed to a thematic analysis of the overarching themes himself, which means that the second part of the book is full of rich pickings for future thematic analyses.

One might expect that for those Harkis who stayed in Algeria, this meant keeping quiet about their past. This is certainly a theme that emerges in many of the interviews. However, recent attempts by some former Harkis prompted in many cases by their children, to obtain a pension from the French army (with varying degrees of success) or enquire (largely fruitlessly) as to whether or not their military service entitled them to French nationality have led to Harki pasts being discreetly resurrected. Daum's interviewees were principally identified from two sources: from email enquiries sent to associations based in France that campaign for Harki rights, and Algeria-based public letter writers, who compose letters for former Harkis – the majority of whom, with the exception of colonial-era administrators, are illiterate – to send to various French institutions. Although Daum is careful to explain to his informants that he cannot assist them in their claims, the fact that they are often living in poverty and have already sought help throws the unbalanced power relationship and differing expectations of the result of the interview (admittedly a hazard in all oral history endeavours) into stark relief. The lack of preparedness of the author for the fact that he would need an interpreter more frequently than he anticipated also creates some ethically uncomfortable moments – for example, when he asks families to find a neighbour, who is not necessarily aware of their history, to come and translate, or indeed when he takes a French-speaker with a 'nice face' encountered that same morning in a café along to interpret, presenting him to the informant as a trustworthy friend (290).

What emerges from Daum's interviews is that what 'happened' to these Harkis after 1962 depended on a combination of factors. Firstly, the extent to which their extended families were able to protect them from eventual reprisals. In a number of families, some cousins or brothers 'worked for the revolution' and others 'worked for the French'. Participation in the war, even on opposing sides, generally did not supersede kin-based ties. But the war did create new networks of connections and sociability – 'the revolutionary family' – which existed alongside, or was meshed with, family loyalties. An intervention from a well-placed family member within this new order could help a Harki avoid mob violence, arrest, imprisonment or the confiscation of his land.

The second factor which emerges from the interviewees' accounts, including those of men who were beaten up and imprisoned, is that the new leaders of Algeria did not want anarchical blood-letting: disorder was, at the very least, bad for state-building. Harkis were more likely to be subjected to physical violence and killing when local communities took 'justice' into their own hands. As Daum shows, this did not mean that some Harkis were not rounded up and imprisoned, forced to do hard labour or indeed killed.

At the same time, interviewees insist on a *logic* of who was killed and by whom. Time and time again, interviewees repeat that those killed were known to have 'fait du mal', i.e. wronged local populations. Face-to-face combat between Algerians in the French army and Algerians in the ALN was considered fair enough.

Exactions committed against civilians, torture and rape were beyond the pale, with authors of such acts far more likely to be punished. It is, of course, almost impossible to verify the extent to which this system of selection functioned: those who were killed cannot speak for themselves, and for those Harkis who remained in Algeria there is a logic of self-preservation in insisting that, if they are still alive, it is because they did not do anything bad. What is even more interesting in these Harkis' accounts, however, is their descriptions of *who* killed Harkis. With a few notable exceptions, interviewees insist that those most eager to wreak vengeance were false *mujahidin*: men who had not participated in the FLN's struggle during the war and were trying to prove their worth as last-minute resisters, or who had indeed been informers for the French army and knew that the Harkis knew who they were. In the words of Hassen Derouiche 'these people wanted to erase their past by killing us' (363). There are indeed a series of examples in the book where a 'real *mujahid*' intervened to prevent a lynching from taking place. Daum's informants thus reproduce a theme common to many conflicts – that of a code of honour between 'real' soldiers. At the same time, these accounts also contribute to a dominant narrative of independence usurped by fakes, a view that is widely held in much of Algerian society today. Thus, despite the fact that 'le harki' embodies the pariah, the narrative of their history sustained by many Harkis is *not* a minority one: they have woven their experiences into the imagined community of ordinary Algerians marginalised by an illegitimate 'system'.

Unsurprisingly, those best able to find their place in post-independence society were the literate ones: it was easier to reject an unskilled labourer for a job on a state-owned farm because 'he was a Harki' than to refuse to take on a literate former Harki in an administration that was desperately short of employees who could read and write. The frequent complaints of many interviewees that they do not have access to employment, healthcare, decent housing and study bursaries for their children are often explained by them as discrimination against Harkis. But as Daum points out, part of the explanation is also because the majority of these men belong to the rural poor and lack connections. In the absence of any top-down state instructions to discriminate against Harkis or their children, what takes centre stage are local systems of patronage, with local administrators and politicians acting as gatekeepers to resources. These are granted or withheld based on old conflicts, some dating back to the War of Independence, or even before, as well as new rivalries.

In addition to the interest of the individual stories, Daum's book thus hints at the possibilities for future research, firstly, on the nature of post-independence state construction and societal change, notably at the local, rural level, and secondly, on how even those who are explicitly excluded from the dominant national(ist) narrative can find their place within its language and tropes.

## Note

1. Works are too numerous to cite here, but Daum frequently draws upon Hautreux's (2013). A special issue of *Les Temps modernes* (2011/5, no. 666) entitled

'Les Harkis 1962-2012: les mythes et les faits' brought together a number of key authors working on the Harkis, including Fatima Besnaci-Lancou, Abderahmen Moumen and Hautreux, to provide a very useful state-of-the-art.

### **References**

Eldridge, Claire. 2009. "'We've Never Had a Voice': Memory Construction and the Children of the Harkis (1962–1991)." *French History* 23 (1): 88–107.

Hautreux, François-Xavier. 2013. *La Guerre d'Algérie des harkis, 1954–1962*. Paris: Perrin.

Natalya Vince

*University of Portsmouth*

 natalya.vince@port.ac.uk

© 2017 Natalya Vince

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1299902>