“Not only do we know the identity of the dead, but we know who the killers are as well.” So said the Algerian novelist Wassini al-Araj recently, referring to the Islamist groups who have claimed responsibility for the massacres of civilians. It is correct that most of the killings are the work of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which sprang from the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). But an increasing body of evidence is pointing to another, hidden hand on the gun – that of the government’s security forces and some of its backed militias, hiding behind the violence of the Islamists to mask another agenda.

The ongoing Algerian Civil War, pitting nationalist and secular government forces against the Islamists, has claimed 80,000 lives so far. During the 1954-1962 war of independence from France, the nationalists and the Islamists fought the French together. Independence won, the two groups turned against each other, struggling for control of Algeria’s future. The nationalists, led by the National Liberation Front (N.L.F.) defeated the Islamists and ruled Algeria from 1962 to 1992.

But the N.L.F’s rule was authoritarian; its policies benefited a narrow state bureaucracy while doing little to advance social justice. Deteriorating social and economic conditions, coupled with repression, paved the way for a popular uprising against the N.L.F. in 1988, during which 150 to 300 youths died.

For a moment, the uprising appeared to have opened a new dawn on Algeria, producing a new constitution, popularly approved in 1989, giving the people the right to form political parties and enjoy individual freedoms like the right to strike. But the constitution’s true test did not come until the June 1990 local elections, the freest in Algeria’s modern history. The Islamic Salvation Front was the major winner, garnering 65 percent of the popular vote. With the 1992 legislative election nearing, tensions rose between the government and the opposition. It took only the government’s decision to cancel the election, blocking an imminent FIS victory, for the current relentless cycle of bloodshed to begin. The FIS had renounced violence and put its faith in the electoral process, only to be robbed of victory. This seemed to leave the gun as the only means to effect the change sought by the Islamists. The resulting civil war remained unabated by either the 1995 presidential elections, which brought

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retired general Liamine Zeroual to power, nor the 1996 elections – boycotted by the FIS.

As the cycle of violence has taken on apocalyptic dimensions – with images of slaughter, decapitation, and even the immolation of men, women and children – Western media have largely bought into the official Algerian government’s line: the Islamists are the sole perpetrators of violence. Yet the government has been alarmingly reluctant to protect its own citizens, even when its security forces have been close enough to the scene of massacres to hear cries for help. Evidence also raises other suspicions: large numbers of victims were supporters of FIS, raising fears the government may be using the current violence to eliminate opposition; the government has been sponsoring armed “self-defense” militias, drawn from groups hostile to the Islamists; and equally troubling, there have been massacres in fertile agricultural lands soon to be privatized, raising suspicions of a secret economic motive.

Many Westerners have accepted the Algerian government’s claims of “liberalization,” as well as the view that the Islamists are solely responsible for the worst violence. Typical of this group is Roger Kaplan, who in an Atlantic Monthly article challenges the mounting evidence of a hidden government role in Algeria’s civil war, attacking other Westerners who give credence to the increasing claims that either the government’s “death squads” or its agents are responsible for much of the violence. Kaplan reiterated testimony of the former American ambassador to Algeria, Ronald Neumann, before a Congressional subcommittee last February, rejecting claims of government “death squads.” According to Neumann, Algeria’s vast territory – “the size of the United States east of the Mississippi” – is apparently a major factor in the inability of the Algerian army to protect the population because it is “self-evident that a relatively small army could not be everywhere.”

This view conveniently overlooks elements like the patterns of violence, the location of the massacres, and the identity of victims, aspects essential to understanding any crime. Because of the varied circumstances surrounding each new massacre, writes Nuri al-Jarah in the Arabic daily Al Hayat, “Algerians have come to believe that no massacre is similar to the other, neither in its motives and causes nor in the identity of its perpetrators.”

Many are perplexed by the government’s reluctance to aid the victims when governmental forces are reported to be nearby the massacres, including Pierre Sanieh, Secretary General of Amnesty International, whose report appeared in European and Arabic-language publications last December. Government security forces, according to the Amnesty report, were close enough to hear cries and the calls for help and see the flames from the burning homes in several of the massacres.

Such reluctance has created increasing skepticism and even sarcasm against government claims of who is responsible for the violence. When in mid-January, 428 people were massacred in Sidi Hamad, questions again centered on “Where was the government?” Rajih Khoury, a columnist for the Lebanese daily An Nahar wrote, “After the massacre, survivors said the killers went to a coffee shop to eat and drink and then killed the patrons and the workers and left. How much time does this take? Crude
calculation suggests that slaughtering 100 persons requires one or two hours at least. Then to prepare the fire to burn another 100 persons...axing and cutting...the trip to the coffee shop to eat and drink...killing the patrons and workers. The horrific operation of massacring must have lasted more than five hours. Where was the government during this time?"

The fear of mines exploding is often cited as an excuse for the lack of intervention by the security forces. “But when the killing is over, the mines do not explode,” said Algerian journalist Salima Ghazali, editor-in-chief of Le Nation newspaper.

The evidence also show that some of the massacres were directed at those who supported or voted for the FIS. Abed Sharef, the author of Algérie Autopsie D’un Massacre [Algeria: The Autopsy of a Massacre] notes one massacre in the village of Wadi al-Had, in which 100 villagers were slaughtered. Sharef interviewed survivors who told him that most of the victims supported the Islamists. While there is no consistent pattern of massacres, many Algerians have discovered telling aberrations. Among these is the Algerian intellectual Asia Musawi, who spoke of massacres occurring increasingly in the least expected places, like Al Balda, Al Madiya, Ayn Dufla, and Al Mizian, which are Islamist dominated areas. The Amnesty International report corroborates Musawi’s conclusions.

As in all wars, violence breeds more violence. State violence gave birth to the opposition’s violence, and the opposition’s gruesome atrocities appear to have tempted government supporters to commit copycat crimes. It is unclear, however, whether government forces are directly involved or are working through proxies that deflect blame from the government.

The Algerian authorities have certainly encouraged various groups hostile to the Islamists to arm for “self-defense” purposes. According to one report, the Ministry of Interior armed a group, “The Protectors of My Country,” of 60,000 men, and the Algerian Army is reported to have armed a group called the “Mujahedeen.” It is no wonder that one observer speaks of “counter terror, born out of terror, represented by pro-government forces.” These groups have been criticized as waging war against people rather than against terrorists.

All post-independence Algerian governments have exploited the ethnic division between the ethnic Arabs and the Berbers, who have their own language, Tamazight, and who number five out of 30 million Algerians. Thus, it is no coincidence that the Algerian government extended its hand to the Berbers, and some secular parties hostile to the Islamists, to establish armed militias to confront and counter the opposition. The Algerian government has also founded and armed the Al Wataniyyun [the Patriots] battalion and other self defense groups to defend remote villages and small residential areas. This official policy has resulted in the proliferation of weapons, with little control over their destination.

Perhaps most sinister of all is that some of the massacres have taken place in agricultural areas, fertile lands close to the capital Algiers, and that a flight of farmers has followed each massacre. These lands, currently owned by the state, will soon be privatized, with priority of purchase given to the farmers who have worked them for years, as dictated by the International Monetary Fund. Since removing the farmers
peacefully would require high compensation, some powerful economic and political leaders may have exploited the cycle of violence, using “Islamist massacres” as a way to drive the farmers off the land.

There is increasing evidence that the killers – determined to eliminate potential heirs to the land – are slaughtering even the youngest children. An increasing body of commentators have been pointing at the link between massacres and the sale of agricultural lands. Also reaching a similar conclusion is Sanieh of Amnesty International. His report acknowledges that some of the massacres have occurred in such agricultural areas, and he has asked “Who is to benefit from having massacres push the farmers off the fertile land?” This pattern of violence clearly show that it has little to do with establishing an Islamic state and much more with economic greed.

Many want to believe that the government has nothing to do with Algeria’s violence, exonerating it from any responsibility. There are two good reasons for this: the anti-colonial legacy which has long provided Algeria’s regimes with their legitimacy, and the exploitation of the violent record and reactionary programmes of the Islamist opposition. However, the continuation of the violence has failed to vindicate the present regime. There is an alarming convergence of evidence and motive that demands those concerned with the suffering in Algeria turn their attention to a rigorous investigation of the possible role played by government in the present tragedy.