

In Algeria, women 'imams' battle Islamic radicalisation

By [AFP](#)

Published: February 28, 2015



Their aim is to steer women away from false preachers promoting radical forms of Islam. PHOTO: MALAYMAIL

ALGIERS: Hundreds of female religious guides have been at the forefront of Algeria's battle against Islamic radicalisation since the civil war that devastated the North African country in the 1990s.

Their aim is to steer women away from false preachers promoting radical forms of Islam.

The surge of the Islamic State (IS) group in Syria and Iraq, and even in Libya next door, as well as the growing influence of al Qaeda-linked militants and Salafists, has them working around the clock.

Known as "mourshidates," their goal is to spread the good word of Islam and a message of tolerance, helping those who have strayed from it.

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“Killing is a capital sin, so how is it that people can kill innocent ones in the name of Islam,” asks Fatma Zohra, who is in her mid-40s, her hair and neck concealed under a matching purple veil and a hijab.

Like the other 300 mourshidates appointed by the religious affairs ministry, Zohra holds a degree in Islam and has learned the Quran by heart.

She said she was “motivated to know Islam better in order to teach the religion” following the traditionally moderate Muslim country’s civil war in the 1990s, which killed at least 200,000 people.

The war erupted after authorities cancelled the 1991 elections, Algeria’s first democratic vote, which the Islamic Action Front was poised to win.

Zohra, who was a student at the time, recalled bitterly as she met a group of women in a mosque, that “Algerians killed Algerians in the name of Islam.”

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For the past 17 years she has been “listening to women, advising them and referring them to specialists” when their problems are not directly linked to religion.

The mourshidates use skills borrowed from psychology and sociology, working in mosques, prisons, youth centres, hospitals and schools. Unlike imams, who are men, they are not allowed to lead prayers.

When the first mourshida was licensed in 1993 to teach and guide women, only housewives showed up, but the audience has grown over the years to include university students and professionals.

“Imams are good but it is much better to confide in a woman,” says Aisha, in her 60s.

Meriem, a high school mathematics teacher, said the rise of “fake prophets,” who seek to indoctrinate young people, persuaded her to attend meetings with the likes of Zohra only a few months ago.

“I wanted to learn the true Islam,” she said.

Samia, another mourshida who decline to give her surname, says she has been working for the past 15 years in a region of Algeria where youths, both boys and girls, have been increasingly radicalised.

“Their mothers suffer to see them become radicalised and confide in me so that together, and with the help of others, we can de-radicalise them,” she said.

Samia warns that Algerians must be alert.

“Even if very few Algerians have joined the ranks of the IS group, vigilance is necessary because radicalisation takes many forms,” she said.

“Pseudo-imams, who know nothing about the teachings of the Koran,” are trying to indoctrinate people through television programmes and the Internet, she said.

“Adolescents in particular must be monitored because they are impressionable and can easily be swayed.”

She recalls how she worked hard to help save a 17-year-old girl after her parents complained that she had begun adopting radicalised behaviour.

[Read: Police hunt for ‘IS-bound’ London girls](#)

The girl’s mother told Samia her daughter “had been indoctrinated and had begun wearing the full Islamic veil” and would admonish the family about attending weddings or watching television.

“For months we counselled the girl and listened to what she had to say. Finally she went back to school and resumed her normal life,” Samia said.

Like Samia, many mourshidates say they are proud to have contributed to help youths from falling into the grips of radical Muslims.

“It is the biggest reward of our work,” one of them said.

Fonte: The Express Tribune
28 de Fevereiro de 2015