

Perceptions of France in Contemporary Algeria

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Q. How are France and French culture perceived in contemporary Algeria and why?

A. Algeria achieved independence on 5 July 1962, after 132 years of French colonial rule and nearly eight years of armed struggle by the Algerian people, under the banner of the National Liberation Front (FLN) and its National Liberation Army (ALN).

School textbooks in Algeria today emphasize the horrors of colonialism: the Algerian people had their land, property, language and culture taken away from them. They were kept in a state of abject poverty and ignorance where they were never considered French citizens, but rather *indigènes*, or later, *Français musulmans*. The War of Independence between 1954 and 1962 only reinforced this image of the barbarity of France. Talk to nearly any Algerian person of a certain age about the war, and you will hear eye-witness accounts of the torture, destruction, rape and murder carried out by the French Army in their attempt to suppress the Algerian nationalist movement.

It might seem logical to conclude that, for Algerians, 'France' simply means a violent, chauvinist exploiter. Yet this is far from being the case. The relationship between France and Algeria, Algerians and the French is much more complex and ambiguous.

It is important to underline from the start that Algerian people at all levels of society are always very careful to distinguish between the French state and the French people. During the war, many of those who suffered most at the hands of the French Army also received significant support from members of French civil society. Accused of planting a bomb in Algiers, FLN member Djamilia Boupacha was brutally tortured after her arrest in April 1959, and as a result became a *cause célèbre* of French intellectuals such as Simone de Beauvoir. I recently interviewed a number of women war veterans in Algeria and they were all particularly keen to tell me about acts of individual kindness and assistance that they had received from French people during the war, as well as pointing out that a small group of French people in Algeria – often members of the Algerian Communist Party (PCA) – took up arms with the FLN. In the Museum of the Army in Algiers, there is a section of paintings dedicated to 'French people who participated in the War of Liberation'.

Yet the dichotomy 'nasty French state'/'kind French individuals' is also far too simplistic, because many Algerian people, during and after the war, respected the French state in both its founding ideologies and its institutions. That is to say, a state which promotes equality and meritocracy, and which has a highly developed system of social welfare and universal education. Baya Hocine, a 17-year-old FLN bomber condemned to death by the French authorities, kept a diary while imprisoned in the infamous Barberousse prison in Algiers in 1957. Hocine was one of the few Algerian women who had received an education under the colonial system, and in her diary she talks about the morals that were instilled in her at school:

Even when I was very young I already knew the principles established by the French Republic of 1789, liberty, equality and brotherhood which have dominated the political and social landscape ... France itself recognizes in its Constitution 'the right of nations to self-determination'.

For many educated Algerians who were involved in the independence struggle, although they hated colonialism, they nevertheless still considered France to be the birthplace of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Integrating the torture and arbitrary treatment that they were subjected to by the French Army with the egalitarian and humanitarian values supposedly indissoluble from the French Republic presented an intellectual problem, and it was a hard lesson to learn that France's colonized peoples were the 'exception' to liberty, equality and fraternity.

Q. So how has Algerian independence changed perceptions of France?

A. In 1962, Algeria became a 'Democratic and Popular Republic'. This title, however, has very little meaning in a country which since 1962 has remained in the hands of army generals under the banner of the FLN. Elections are fixed, dissent has been violently oppressed, critical journalists are imprisoned, and the best education, housing and jobs are reserved for those who are part of the elites that form the Algerian political system. And thus the light of French republican values still shines brightly, perhaps brighter still for those born after Independence who never directly experienced colonialism. Watching French TV channels, which are in nearly every Algerian home since the advent of satellite television in the late 1980s, Algerians see a country where fixing electoral results would provoke a scandal rather than a cynical shrug of the shoulders, they see nightly debates on TV where the freedom of speech is respected, they see a country which loudly declares that success and promotion are based on exams and merit, not on one's wealth or family tree. And, of course, the famous French social security system, with its public housing, health care, child and unemployment benefit – whereas in Algeria, your family remains your only form of protection against illness and poverty. For those outside the privileged elite in Algeria, the French model might appear an attractive one.

And yet the reality of the 'French Republican system' can be quite a shock to Algerians who want to go to France to study, work, or even for a holiday. Already, the lengthy process which Algerians have to go through to obtain a visa gives a hint that they are not welcome. And the experiences of those Algerians who have gone to live in France – popularly known in Algeria as *les immigrés* – tell two stories. On the one hand, when these *immigrés* return to Algeria on holiday, they seem like rich tourists: the euro is a much stronger currency than the dinar, and the cost of living is much lower in Algeria. However, what this apparent wealth hides is that these *immigrés* have often spent eleven months of the year working extremely hard in poorly paid jobs – security guards, cleaners – to return to Algeria for a month and *faire le show* to their family and friends. For in France, Algerians, even third-generation French-born, will always be considered *immigrés*, described as 'issued from immigration' or 'of Maghrebian origin'. Despite French anti-racism laws, an Arab-sounding surname still remains a major obstacle in renting an apartment or finding a better-paid job.

Moreover, for Algerians watching the news or discussion programmes on French TV, it is clear that French society views the Muslim religion with increasing suspicion. Algerians are painfully conscious that in recent years 'Muslim' is all too

easily associated with ‘terrorist’, throwing them in with a set of extremist beliefs which the majority of Algerians abhor. In the 1990s, the Algerian people were among the first victims of the violence of Islamic fundamentalists, long before the 1995 Paris bombing, 9/11, or the Madrid and London attacks. Algerians are both irritated that France, Europe and the USA are only just realizing the danger that this radical minority represent, and frustrated that the West fails to distinguish between these violent fundamentalists and the vast majority of followers of Islam.

Of course, discrimination and prejudice are not a problem unique to Algerians living in France, but it is perhaps harder for Algerians to accept because they feel that they ‘know’ France. Algeria was the most ‘colonized’ of France’s colonies – it was considered a department of France and those of European origin made up a tenth of Algeria’s population in 1954. Algerians speak the French language, they are exposed to the culture, they have a shared history. In 2004, there were 40,000 people with dual Algerian-French nationality, often Franco-Algerian couples. Yet France sends out multiple and contradictory messages to Algerians, and Algerians are perhaps forced to accept that they will always be the ‘exception’ to France’s universal values of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Q. How important is the colonial history in shaping perceptions of France in Algeria?

A. Victims of colonial violence in Algeria are still alive to tell their stories both publicly and privately. Examples of atrocities committed by the French authorities during the colonial period and the War of Independence are well publicized in school textbooks, TV programmes and newspapers. Yet in Algeria today, France is reproached not so much for these acts of violence themselves, but because the French state has largely refused to publicly acknowledge them or officially apologize. Indeed, it was only in October 1999 that a law was passed in France officially renaming the years 1954–62 ‘the Algerian War’ rather than ‘operations in North Africa’. The conflict between France and Algeria has moved into the sphere of history and memory.

The 8th May 2005 witnessed the 60th anniversary of what is commonly known in Algeria as ‘Sétif’. While 8 May 1945 is celebrated in Europe as VE Day, in Algeria the date is indelibly associated with the massacre of thousands of Algerians in Sétif and Guelma (300km east of Algiers) by the French colonial authorities, following pro-independence demonstrations. The number of Algerians killed is generally estimated as between 20,000 and 30,000; the Algerian Government claims a death toll of 45,000.

Sétif is widely commemorated in Algeria, and yet 2005 was the first year that these events were recognized in the French press. The front page of the national daily, *Libération* read: ‘8 May 1945: The forgotten massacre of Algeria’. A few months earlier, on 27 February 2005, Hubert Colin de Verdière, French Ambassador to Algeria, signalled a milestone in official discourse by describing the massacres of 8 May 1945 as an ‘inexcusable tragedy’, an important symbolic gesture for Algerians although it still fell short of an apology.

Algerians, especially war veterans and those in academic circles, want France to recognize the suffering it inflicted on the people it colonized. For this reason, a law passed in France on 23 February 2005 has created a great deal of anger in the Algerian press and government, as well as among historians on both sides of the Mediterranean. This law declares that from now on, the school curriculum in France

should recognize 'the positive role of the French overseas presence, notably in North Africa'. The law appears to hail the return of a version of colonialism long banished from mainstream intellectual discourse, in which the oppression, exploitation and violence exercised by colonial powers are masked under the patronizing and derogatory idea of a 'civilizing mission'. The idea that colonialism had any benefits in Algeria is one that is fiercely rejected by all levels of Algerian society, for whom 1830 marked the destruction of what had been a rich culture and an educated society.

For many Algerians, this law is evidence of the continuing influence of certain strands of the *pied-noir* community in France. 'Pied-noir' is the term used to describe French men and women born in Algeria, who were repatriated in vast numbers after 1962. Often these people were the most fervent supporters of the colonial system, with all its injustices and inequalities. Within this section of French society were those who formed the colonial administration, who requisitioned land from Algerian farmers, who exploited its labourers. Many *pied-noir* groups remain extremely bitter by what they see as General de Gaulle's 'abandonment' of Algeria in 1962 and sustain a nostalgic vision of 'French Algeria'. The *pied-noir* lobby is a marginal but influential group in French politics, and now there is a right-wing government in power it has space to flex its political muscle. Such developments are viewed with apprehension in Algeria. The Algerian Government and people want to deal with a France free of both its colonial possessions and colonial mentality, not the France of pro-'French Algeria'.

Many Algerians see France as 'behind the times' in its official historiography. In a global culture where states are encouraged to recognize genocides committed in its name, to apologize for them, and to memorialize them, Algerians are still waiting for France to say sorry.

Q. How does the Algerian elite perceive France?

A. The Algerian elite is composed of the politicians who publicly represent the state and the army generals who, behind the scenes, have held real power in Algeria since Independence. In the absence of both democracy and a stable economy, the sole source of legitimization for Algerian politicians has been their status as veterans of the War of Liberation. Current president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, for example, was an officer in the FLN's National Liberation Army at the age of 20. This goes some way to explaining why the Algerian President has recently been so outspoken in his criticism of the French law of 23 February 2005. Rousing the spectre of French colonialism is a way of resurrecting his status as the saviour of the Algerian people, and thus improving his popularity.

And yet Bouteflika's attack on France is a rhetorical one. Maintaining close ties with France is essential to those in power both because of the major role that France plays in the Algerian economy, and because of the mutual interest that leaders in both countries have in the suppression of political Islam. Thus, while Algeria has always refused to officially join the International Francophone Organisation, in concrete terms of investment and cooperation, Algeria remains the most 'francophone' of France's former colonies.

The position of many Algerian army generals in relation to France is somewhat delicate. Many fought on the side of the French Army for much of the War of Independence and changed sides late on in the conflict, making them suspect patriots for most Algerians. One of the most powerful army generals in Algeria, Khaled Nezzar, only deserted the French Army in 1958 – already halfway through the

war. This explains why the army generals need more authentic war veterans as figureheads.

The army generals want to do business with France, especially if it involves 'commission' and backhanders. They do not, however, want the French state or society embarking on any kind of criticism or debate about the regime. In 2002 Nezzar attempted to sue Habib Souaïdia, a former Algerian army officer, and France's Channel Five for defamation, following a TV programme on Souaïdia's book, *La Guerre Sale (The Dirty War)*, which accused the Algerian Army of civilian massacres and torturing and killing suspects as the state struggled to control Islamic fundamentalism in the 1990s. To army generals such as Nezzar, the complaints and campaigns of human rights groups are a particularly irritating aspect of French political culture.

The children of these politicians and generals are popularly known as the 'chichis' in Algeria. They have all the trappings of being the most Westernized group of Algerian society, with their imported cars, designer clothes, private beaches, and education abroad, often in France. Yet in the midst of this conspicuous consumption, it is unlikely that these young people would think of themselves as aspiring to a French cultural model: after all, Independent Algeria has provided them with all the privileges they could want.

Q. Who are the 'arabisants' and 'francisants' in Algerian society, and what are the differences in their attitudes towards France?

A. The division between 'arabisants' and 'francisants' is a schism within the Algerian middle class, often very evident within the university system. French colonialism imposed French as the official language of the Algerian people. One of the key elements of the Algerian anti-colonial, nationalist identity was thus the promotion of the Arabic language. Upon Independence, Arabic was declared the national language, and a serious policy of Arabicization of the administration and education system began in the 1970s.

The problem was that classical Arabic was little known to the vast majority of Algerians, who spoke Arabic dialect or one of the Berber languages. The first wave of students to be educated in Arabic found that when they later reached the job market, the language that they actually needed was French. These frustrated and resentful young arabophones soon after provided a fertile recruitment ground for political Islamists. This was even more so the case because, in the absence of Algerians who could teach in classical Arabic, the state was forced to recruit teachers from abroad, in particular from Egypt and Pakistan. These latter two countries took this as an opportunity to rid themselves of some of their most troublesome Islamists, who then continued their fundamentalist discourse in Algeria. Because there were far less arabophone teachers than there were francophone teachers, academic standards also slipped.

'*Francisants*' are those parts of the Algerian middle class who have continued to speak, write and work largely using the French language. *Francisants* include many of Algeria's best-known writers and intellectuals. What was once the language of the colonial oppressor has in many ways become a form of resistance against enforced monolingualism: Algerian francophone writer, Assia Djebar has described French as 'the language-refuge, the language of yesterday's colonizer'. For a *francisant*, *arabisant* means not just an arabophone, but also implies a lower academic standard

and a certain narrow-mindedness. *Arabisants*, meanwhile, stereotype the *Francisants* as representing a snooty kind of Western intellectualism.

Q. Do Algerian women view France more positively than Algerian men?

A. There are Algerian women in all sections of Algerian society: they are in the elite, they are *arabisants*, they are *francisants*, they have supported Islamic fundamentalist groups, so we need to be careful when making generalizations about ‘what Algerian women think’.

In 1958, in the middle of the War of Independence, the French Government started an explicit propaganda campaign to try and woo Algerian women, claiming that they would ‘emancipate’ them from repressive Arabo-Muslim traditions if they supported the continuation of French rule in Algeria. For the colonial authorities, this meant introducing the right to vote for Muslim women, enforcing the French civil code over the Muslim *Shari’a* (thus outlawing practices such as polygamy and repudiation), and publicly unveiling a group of women in the centre of Algiers.

Algerian women were not fooled. Algerian society was and remains highly patriarchal, but the main oppressor for both men and women in 1958 was France. Algerian women were also the first victims of the violence of the French Army: it was women who were raped and who suffered the brunt of the destruction of their homes and forcible displacement.

Indeed, the foremost campaigners for women’s rights in Algeria since 1962 have been the *moudjahidate*, women veterans from the War of Independence. These women organized major protests over the passage of the Family Code in 1984, which officially installed the *Shari’a* as the text by which family life would be governed. Women, who had fought as equals alongside men between 1954 and 1962, were outraged at being reduced to the status of eternal minors who could only act through a tutor.

Women’s rights campaigners in Algeria – a vocal minority – have continued not to be particularly influenced by French, or Western, models of feminism, which are seen as the product of a very different socio-economic context and thus often far removed from the day-to-day realities faced by Algerian women. Campaigners against the Family Code object not only to its philosophy of female inferiority, but also its practical consequences: repudiation, for example, often leaves women and children destitute overnight, with no safety net provided by the state. The position of women in Algeria has thus always been integrated into wider social concerns, and Algerian women today are at the forefront of campaigns for better access to water, housing, medical care, social welfare and respect for human rights. For Algerian women, equality between men and women goes hand in hand with wider issues about creating a more equal society.

Q. Is there a generational difference in attitudes towards France?

A. In a word, yes. Whatever frustrations older people have with Algeria today, their personal experience of the humiliation of being a colonized people means that they would never express regret for Algeria becoming independent. Many older Algerian people also refuse to take French nationality, even if they have lived and worked in France for decades. For this generation who lived through colonialism and the struggle for independence, taking French nationality is indelibly associated with being

a *harki*, the term used to describe Algerians who fought with the French during the war, and who migrated to France in significant numbers after 1962.

This is not the case for the younger generation outside the privileged elite, who often joke that if there was a referendum today, they would vote for Algeria to return to French control. Of course, this is less an expression of veneration for France than the manifestation of the deep frustrations of young Algerians today, for whom the future seems to hold few prospects. The unemployment rate is around 30 per cent of the active population, with under-25s the most affected; the political system is reserved for those with connections and the rapidly ageing war veterans. Young people are tired of the glorified, militarized history on which the power of these war 'heroes' is based. On 5 October 1988, thousands of youths rioted in the streets of Algiers, tearing down flags and attacking other symbols of authority. In the next few days the protest spread across the country. For these young people, the enemy was no longer France but single party rule, mismanagement and corruption, which were not only denying them the possibility to fulfil their potential, but also failing to even stock food in the shops.

Young Algerians thus have no qualms about trying to obtain French nationality, and for many this seems the only hope for a better quality of life. When the French President Jacques Chirac visited Algeria in 2003, he expressed his pleasure at the warm welcome he received. What he perhaps did not care to notice was that the one and a half million young Algerians who had come to greet him were waving their passports and shouting 'Chirac, visa!'

Q. From the late 1980s onwards Islamic fundamentalism became a major political force in Algeria. How do these groups view France?

A. The late 1980s and 1990s were characterized by the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria. After the riots of October 1988, the then president Chadli Bendjedid announced the first multiparty elections. Among the new parties to be formed was the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). In a climate of economic despair and revulsion towards the existing system, the FIS gained an overwhelming majority in the first round of elections to the National Assembly in December 1991. To avoid the possibility of a FIS victory, the Algerian Army stepped in and cancelled the second round of elections. Algeria descended into a decade of bloody violence as the FIS and its various factions tried to overthrow the Algerian state. Between 100,000 and 150,000 people are estimated to have been killed.

The Islamic Salvation Front demanded the installation of an Islamic state and the strict application of the *Shari'a*. Unsurprisingly, France and the West were depicted in FIS propaganda as the infidel, and Western clothes, music and television as a poisonous influence on Algerian Muslims. In response to the French Government's support for the Algerian Army, one of the offshoots of the FIS, the Armed Islamic Groups (GIA) attacked French people both in Algeria and in France. A bomb in the Saint Michel metro station in Paris in 1995 killed eight people and injured 200.

The Islamists attempted to re-appropriate Algerian history, idealizing pre-colonial Ottoman society and depicting the period since 1830 as one long *jihad* (holy war) against French colonialism. According to the Islamists, the battle for independence was incomplete. Those currently in power remained attached to Western values and subject to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

A religious and cultural war needed to be won to purify Algeria from all non-Islamic influences.

The fact that the FIS tried to formulate itself as the true heir of the war against colonialism is clear even in the name it chose – like the FLN, the FIS is a ‘Front’, and phonetically ‘fis’ is similar to ‘fils’, son. An editorial in the FIS newspaper *El-Mounquid* (‘The Saviour’) in April 1994 opened by appropriating a citation from Frantz Fanon, the favourite columnist of the FLN journal *El Moudjahid* in 1954–62: ‘We are not waiting for colonialism to commit suicide. It is obvious that it will fiercely defend itself.’ The FLN was *hisb fransa*, ‘the party of France’. On 30 August 1994, the FIS distributed a tract in London, declaring ‘The French declare a new war against Muslims in Algeria’.

For all their supposed hatred of the West and its values, many Islamic fundamentalists, including those responsible for massacres in Algeria, later claimed political asylum in France, as well as in Britain and the USA. The French press, and a number of French intellectuals, attacked the Algerian Army for violating human rights in its attempts to quash the Islamist movement – a rather uncomfortable parallel with the role played by French intellectuals between 1954 and 1962 with respect to the French Army.

The Algerian people were only too well aware of the army’s gross excesses and arbitrary treatment, and yet it was also clear that if the FIS came to power they would be the last people to uphold freedom of expression and protection from physical punishment which certain sections of French society demanded for exiled FIS partisans. In the late 1980s and in 1991 Algerians did vote massively for the FIS, but this vote expressed their sense of exclusion from the existing system rather than a hatred of France and the West or the desire to establish an Islamic state. The majority of Algerians were soon revolted by the violence of the FIS and its offshoots, who assassinated intellectuals and artists, massacred whole villages and killed teenage girls not wearing the *hijab*. Many Algerians hold France and the West partly responsible for the wave of violence which they suffered from 1988 onwards. Persisting in their belief that Islamic fundamentalism was an internal problem for Muslim countries, the French and British Governments for a long time left radical imams to preach hate-filled sermons in French and British mosques, and collect huge sums of money to fund terrorist attacks in Algeria.

Q. What is the Berber question? How is this tied up with the legacy of French rule?

A. The Algerian people was formed through centuries of different colonizations: the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Vandals, the Arabs, the Ottoman Empire and the French have all left their genetic and cultural imprint. The Berber language – Tamazight – dates back around 5,000 years and is the first language spoken in Kabylia, the Aurès Mountains and among the Tuaregs in the south of Algeria.

During the colonial period, the French authorities, seeking local collaborators to enforce their rule, emphasized that Kabyles were different from ‘Arabs’ – they spoke Berber instead of Arabic dialectic, they had fairer skin, they were supposedly more pliable to French rule. This invented submission was clearly proved false during the War of Independence – some of the fiercest fighting against the French Army took place in Kabylia – but the damage was done. France’s divide-and-rule tactics have left a poisonous legacy in which cultural diversity has become intrinsically entwined with issues of privilege and exclusion.

In an attempt to sweep away ethnic divisions associated with colonial rule, the Algerian state since Independence has tried to enforce a single Arabo-Muslim identity. When the Algerian Government declared Arabic the official language of Algeria and embarked on its policy of Arabicization, it not only suppressed French, but also Tamazight. In April 1980 a conference by writer Mouloud Mammeri on the use of the Berber language was banned in Kabylia, setting off a revolt which became known as the ‘Berber Spring’. Such protests have continued since then. People in Kabylia demand work and housing – as all Algerians do – but also that their cultural identity be acknowledged, and Tamazight be recognized as an official language alongside Arabic.

By attacking monolingualism, the centralized state and official ideology, Kabyle activists are in many ways the natural allies of human rights organizations, campaigners for democracy and *francisants*. However, Kabyles are not in any way more ‘pro-French’. People in Kabylia are very proud of the role played by the region in the anti-colonial struggle, and their battle against the centralized state and the imposition of a monolithic Arabo-Muslim identity is regularly described in the same terms as the fight against French colonialism – a continuing struggle for the recognition of an Arabo-Berber-Muslim Algeria. As the photos below show, monuments to those killed during the Berber Spring are often to be found alongside memorials to local men and women killed fighting for Independence between 1954 and 1962.

In sum, the image of France remains an omnipresent feature in contemporary Algerian society. ‘France the colonizer’ persists as a crucial historical reference in political discourse from all points of view. And France, the twenty-first-century, post-colonial Republic continues to be the source of both dreams and disillusionment for the Algerian people.



War memorials in the town of Freha, near Tizi Ouzou in Kabylia. Commemoration of those killed during the Berber Spring opposite a stele dedicated to martyrs of the War of Independence.

Further reading

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