

The Bitter Legacy of French Colonization of Algeria

by Hilal Khashan - July 12, 2023

Algerian-French relations have never been normal. They've never been governed by the principles and customs of traditional diplomacy between countries. The Algerians' collective consciousness is traumatized by the historical memory of unbridled occupation. More than 60 years after the end of the Algerian war, the wounds are still open on both sides despite the occasional symbolic gesture by France, which refuses to express regret or apologize. French President Emmanuel Macron angered Algeria two years ago by accusing the its military-political establishment of writing an official history of the colonial period based on falsehoods and of inciting hatred toward France. However, attestations by senior French military officers who fought in Algeria about how they commanded their troops contradict Macron's claims.

Occupation of Algeria

France has intended to occupy Algeria since the time of Napoleon Bonaparte. In 1808, he assigned engineer Vincent-Yves Boutin to prepare a study on the Algerian coast and to craft a detailed map of the best landing site for the French army. However, these plans were put on hold after Napoleon's disastrous defeat in the 1812 Russian campaign, subsequent losses at Leipzig and elsewhere, and eventual abdication after the Treaty of Fontainebleau in 1814. Following a diplomatic incident in 1827, the French blockaded the port of Algiers, made easy by the destruction of the Algerian fleet during the Battle of Navarino. In 1830, King Charles X ordered an invasion of Algeria partly to deflect attention from his domestic difficulties. The French occupation of Algeria lasted from 1830 to 1962 and was the most prolonged and heinous colonial occupation in modern history.

During its colonization of Algeria, France sought to erase the country's culture and dismantle its society through genocide. France discouraged the use of Arabic and forced the Algerians to use French. It impoverished them by seizing arable land, giving it to the French colonialists, and stealing natural resources like as oil and gas. It implemented draconian policies toward the indigenous population, including impoverishment, displacement, bloodshed and the monopolization of Algeria's markets. French officers often gave peasants a choice between providing food or suffering extermination. They pointed their guns at villages while the villagers walked toward them carrying eggs, sheep, chickens and honey. French-colonized Algeria provided all means of livelihood for the new settlers from France and the rest of Europe, entitling them to own Algeria's most fertile land. The

first European settlement goes back to 1836, and by the end of the 19th century there were 1 million settlers in Algeria, mostly French but also Italians and Spaniards. France was keen on strengthening Europe's presence in Algeria and on eradicating its Arab and Islamic identity in favor of Christianizing the country. France used Algeria as a springboard to the rest of North Africa, the Sahel and Africa's Atlantic territories.

Genocidal Massacres

The French did not seize Algeria quickly. Algerians put up fierce resistance, prompting the French army to use unusual cruelty. By 1849, they succeeded in subduing the country, especially in the north, two years after Emir Abdelkader surrendered to Gen. Louis Juchault de Louis Juchault de Lamoricie. Before pacifying Algeria, France committed systematic killings, torture and crimes against humanity. In 1960, France conducted its first 17 nuclear tests in southern Algeria. Three years ago, France returned to Algiers the skulls of 24 Algerian fighters killed and beheaded by the French army during the battle of Zaatcha in 1849. The French army sent the skulls to Paris as war trophies. For Algerians, the skulls – part of the Museum of Mankind's 18,000-skull collection – attested to French colonial barbarism and fascination with decapitation that goes back to inventing the guillotine in 1792.

Marshall Thomas Bugeaud said the objective of the French campaign against Algeria was to occupy it with the sword and the plow: "The sword is on the necks of the Arabs, and the plow is in the hands of the French colonizer." In November 1830, the French garrison in Blida, southwest of Algiers, massacred the civilian population to avenge a rebel attack, killing an untold number of the downtown residents. They did not spare babies, slitting their throats in their mothers' arms. Describing a separate massacre at El Ouffia, southeast of Algiers, Gen. Anne Jean Marie Rene Savary said French soldiers rode on horseback and carried human heads on the blades of their swords as onlookers gazed at the slaughtered women with their severed forearms and ears. Commenting on the massacre, the French commander-in-chief congratulated his forces for the enthusiasm and intelligence they showed on that occasion. Gen. Nicolas Changarnier said the only entertainment he allowed in the winter to his troops, stationed in Wadi El Harrach and Bourkika, was marauding the tribes in the area.

In 1844, the French turned the Ketchaoua Mosque, one of Algeria's most famous historical mosques, into an armory and a residence for bishops. When thousands of Algerian protesters sat inside it, the French soldiers killed them all. Gen. Eugene Cavaignac's troops committed some of the most gruesome atrocities during his deployment in Algeria in the 1830s. He believed that excessive violence against Algerians was unavoidable on the path to civilizing them. In one instance in 1845, a

French army commander ordered fumigating more than 750 Algerians who sought shelter in a cave and refused to surrender. Col. Lucien de Montagnac proudly declared that he cut off heads – not artichoke heads, but many human heads. He said some of the soldiers told him that their officers urged them not to leave any Arab alive, and he added that the soldiers he was honored to command were afraid that their officers would order their flogging if they brought in a living Arab. French soldiers committed many crimes against civilians – executing raids that were frequently referred to as “razzias” – by killing and displacing them and stealing their possessions and sources of livelihood, which became a source of food for the troops.

Francois Canrobert, celebrated for his spectacular bravery as a light infantry battalion commander, wrote in his memoirs that his unit burned the villages of the Amazigh Beni Snous tribe. The soldiers did not hesitate to kill the elderly, women and children because no one could defend them. The most brutal act was the killing of women after raping them. Razzia spread among the soldiers of the French army. It was a method of systematic destruction, sparing neither people nor property. The generals of France’s Army of Africa, whether royalists, republicans or Bonapartists, considered their actions to be glorious. The first phase of the occupation of Algeria involved reducing the population so that it would no longer threaten the French forces. Between 1830 and the beginning of the French Third Republic in 1870, the local population decreased by about 875,000.

The French promised the Algerians self-rule if they fought alongside them. The number of Algerian soldiers who fought with the Free French Forces in World War II reached 175,000, of whom 26,000 died during the war. Algerian soldiers were always in the first ranks of the war, forming shields for the French troops. When the war ended, the Algerians protested peacefully to express their joy, hoping France would keep its promises. Instead, the French military and pied-noir settlers killed at least 45,000 Algerians in the Setif and Guelma demonstrations on May 8, 1945. France reneged on its promises, paving the way for the 1954 Algerian War of Independence. In Vietnam, Algerians in the Foreign Legion saw what happened in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and how a Third World irregular military force defeated the vaunted French army. They decided to rise to arms to gain Algeria’s independence, which they did six months later.

On Oct. 17, 1961, the French police committed a massacre by order of the Paris police chief, Maurice Papon, against Algerians who participated in a peaceful demonstration, killing at least 200 demonstrators. More than 800 others disappeared, and reports claim that the police officers threw them into the sewers and the Seine River. Although Charles de Gaulle knew what happened, he kept the officers responsible for the massacre in their positions.

Discrimination, Resistance and Betrayal

The 1870 Cremieux Decree granted French citizenship to Algeria's Jewish community and denied it to Muslims. Their exclusion from the naturalization law was a prelude to the 1881 Indigenous People Law, which required them to obey Europeans unthinkingly. A list of 41 punishable acts included opening a school without a permit, refusal to work on European farms, delay in paying taxes, assembly of more than five persons and uttering anti-French phrases. The law gave the governor-general unfettered power to impose punishments without trial in the interest of public security. It also entitled him to adopt the principle of collective responsibility in response to personal offenses and authorized administrators and mayors to imprison people and confiscate their property without a judicial ruling. Gen. Charles de Gaulle repealed the law in 1944, giving Algerian Muslims French rights.

In 1827, the French minister of war, comte de Clermont-Tonnerre, said in his report to the French Cabinet that the occupation of Algeria would lead to its people's civilization and Christianization. In 1904, the French governor-general of Algeria issued a decree banning the opening of Arabic-language schools without a license from the military authority. The license stipulated allegiance to France and a pledge to refrain from teaching about Islam or the history of Algeria and the Arab world. However, France failed to erase the Islamic identity of the Algerian people despite the intensity of missionary activity and its fight against the Arabic language, prompting exasperated French lawmakers to accuse the Algerians of living on the margins of history.

The French government did not express interest in allowing its Algerian collaborators, known as Harkis, to immigrate to France. However, French officers who commanded them helped about 10 percent of them to make it to France in violation of official instructions. In France, they lived in squalid camps, and scores of children died of disease and poor medical care. Those who stayed behind endured reprisals and defamation.

The Rift Deepens

Algeria's current president, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, said a sweet word could not erase 132 years of French colonization. A protest movement from 2019 to 2021 raised demands to expel France and the French language from Algeria. Tebboune identified with the matter because of the intractable differences with France and its refusal to apologize for its colonial past. The Algerian government tightened the screws on the French language, which had dominated all aspects of life. The Ministry of Culture also told its departments and institutions to revert to using the Arabic language in transactions and activities in compliance with the provisions of the Constitution. Some Algerians said

the measure reflects the Algeria the people want, and although it came late, it is good. Many described this long-awaited decision as equivalent to the departure of the last French soldier from Algeria.

Relations between Algeria and France have recently hit a new low. Tebboune issued a decree in June requiring the full performance of the Algerian national anthem on official occasions. The anthem contains the lines: “Oh, France, the day of reckoning is coming, so get ready and take the answer from us.” This prompted angry statements from French officials. A new banknote issued last year and featuring text in both English and Arabic also sparked outrage in France. Algeria has also started teaching English at the primary school level instead of French as part of the dispute with Paris over cultural memory.

The colonial legacy of the political disharmony between Algeria and France became an ideological struggle. The conflict has returned in the context of divergent interests between Macron and the new Algeria led by Tebboune, as well as French pressure on Algeria to halt its political, economic and cultural transformation. The crimes committed by France against the Algerian people left deep wounds that have not yet healed, primarily because of the unresolved history between the two countries. Algeria insists that France take political and legal steps to do justice to memory and history. France rejects Algerian demands, arguing that memory belongs to historians. French historian Benjamin Stora said history unites Algerians and French, but memory separates them.

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