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# Theory and Politics of African Decolonization

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### Final Research Paper

*Research Question:* During the Algerian War of Independence, how did Algerian nationalism and Pan-Arabism function as unifying identities that contributed to the separatist movement?

## INTRODUCTION

The history of western colonialism in Africa has been one of oppression, exploitation, and power. In the heat of the Algerian War of Independence, French literary theorist Roland Barthes published a series of essays that stitched colonialism and conflict together as a way of explaining nationalist backlash in Algeria. Barthes wrote that the goal of colonialism “is to deny the thing. For this, two means are available: either to name it as little as possible; or else to give it the meaning of its contrary” (Evans, 457). This has been the overarching bend of European colonialism on the African continent. The notion of identity and the meaning behind it has had profound implications for both the colonized and the colonizer. In the case of Algeria, the Arab nationalist identity provided the general thrust for Algerians to push back against French colonialism and the violence taking place in their country. The fundamental question that this work seeks to inform is how did Pan-Arabism function as a unifying identity that contributed to the successful development of Algerian nationalism during the War of Independence. Similarly, how did Pan-Arabism inform the meaning of a particular Algerian nationalist identity during the years 1954-62.

In the context of Algeria, the concept of Pan-Arabism overlapped with the attractive language of communist expansiveness and liberation that shaped notions of a distinctive Algerian society. In its broadest sense, Pan-Arabism is a concept and movement which “recognizes the close affinity shared by the Arab people” (Reiser, 218). Possessing fundamental nationalist sentiments, Pan-Arabism provokes “a new expanded sense of community” which seeks changes in the external social reality (220). Pan-Arabism has manifested itself in the “intergovernmental cooperation between the sovereign states in military, political, cultural and economic matters (227). Most notably, Pan-Arabism was presented as the dominant factor in forming the United Arab Republic (UAR) that merged Egypt and Syria under the leadership of Nasser. The overarching theme of the Pan-Arabist movement is a dialectical process that provides integrated unity among Arab peoples (230).

During the Algerian conflict, the class divide between the pied-noir's (French settlers) and indigenous peoples (Algerians) resulted in social revolt, which manifested itself through a nationalist agitation and Islamic strain of return that is fundamental to the Pan-Arabist movement (Laurence, 680). In this sense, examining the Algerian conflict through the lens of Pan-Arabism provides the backdrop to discuss how particularly salient identities shape our understanding of the political, social, and religious consequences of decolonization in Algeria. In turn, this work seeks to provide a global analysis of Algerian nationalism during a time where profound ideological forces of communism and nationalist identity inspired a young class of Algerians to form their own independent nation within the framework of a Pan-Arabist approach to a society of modernity.

## **FRENCH COLONIALISM IN ALGERIA**

Over the course of a century and climaxing in the years 1954-62, French colonialism in Algeria produced a fragmented state, which, in turn, gave rise to a new nationalist force. In the context of Algeria, the French viewed it as a part of France itself (Davis, 501). Through this sense of claim grew an agitation among Algerians that consolidated itself into a separate Arab identity. This organic movement, which possessed a political message rooted in a direct appeal to nationalism, coupled with a thread of Islamic universalism, emerged as a touchstone for disenfranchised Algerians (Shlaim, 340). “Their [Islamic nationalist] message was more salient to the social identity of most citizens than either socialism or secular nationalism, which were widely perceived as non-indigenous ideologies that had failed in the past” (Hoyt, 173). In the case of Algeria, before Western powers transplanted themselves in the Maghreb, the tribal nature of Algeria and the presence of a federation of indigenous groups created challenges for the prospects of a unified people.

Over the course of a century, as an unequal class system of French pied-noirs and Algerians surfaced more visibly, the ethnic complexity of Algeria became less challenging to consolidate as a consensus hardened among Algerians that located French colonial order as the national enemy. Consequently, the National Liberation Front (FLN) surfaced as the political tool representing the social interests of oppressed Algerians in the resistance against the French (Evans, 120). In this context, FLN leaders leveraged this Arab national identity that reproduced the explicit social struggle against French colonialism in favor of Algerians. While their message addressed a certain kind of Algerian nationalism, leaders of the National Liberation Front were not particularly pious Muslims. Instead, they viewed Islam as a sub-identity to rally the Arab polity that was Muslim to this thread of nationalism which provoked Franco resentment and, in turn, aspirations for national independence. “The FLN was intended, from its inception, to be a

large tent where any Algerian, regardless of political affiliation, was welcome to volunteer in the war of independence. The strong link between Islamic affiliation and national affiliation is evidenced by the re-appropriation of the churches, after the independence, and their conversion into mosques” (Kosmin and Keysar, 109). Having said that, socialism that brought Algeria into the fold of industrialization and modernity was central to the FLN’s notions of an independent Algerian state. They sought an independent Algerian state entrenched in a specific kind of Arab national identity, but blended with an authoritarian system that could produce economic success.

### **RISE OF ARAB NATIONALISM**

During the colonial period, the unequal distribution of rights, violent repression of native Algerians, and failures by the French to reform provided the impetus for the rise of the FLN. As Professor Martin Evans describes in his work, *The Memory of Resistance: French Opposition to the Algerian War*, the FLN “movement was made up of former youth scouts from the rural hinterlands, whose political belly was fed on poverty, long hatreds, notions of virility, and traditional Islamic values. They came not to renew but to revert, for this was the ‘conservative interior’ of Algeria’s nationalism” (Evans, 120). The FLN’s avowed purpose was “the restoration of the sovereign, democratic and social, Algerian state within the framework of Islamic principles” (Francis, 556).

Yet, while Islam was an encompassing category of this new Arab movement fomenting in Algeria, the nationalist outgrowth in Algeria was seen as a transitional ideology whose trajectory was to be “transcended by more enduring institutions and discourses” within the sphere of political influence (Gelvin, 13). In other words, the leadership of the FLN viewed change on the basis of politics and power, compared to transformation along purely religious

lines. While religion was important, the dominant view of nationalism in Algeria sought institutional change in the realm of politics. In this post-World War II context, the ideological thrust of the FLN was secular and socialist. They were nationalist politicians who just happened to be Muslim, but were truly inspired by the successful revolution in China and the growing clout of the Soviet Union in the undeveloped world of Africa and Southeast Asia.

The FLN was composed of guerrillas warriors, supported from posts in neighboring Morocco and Tunisia (Nurse, 310). The paramilitary wing of the FLN “launched a full-scale war against the French. By 1958 the National Liberation Front numbered 50,000 full-time fighters and an unknown number of part-time auxiliaries” (310). The conflict involved all aspects of Algerian society, but came to be dominated by Arabs. Additionally, the war engaged French settlers in Algeria, as well as soldiers and administrators of the Fourth Republic (310). Understanding the threat this posed to their colonial influence in North Africa, France had committed 375,000 troops by this time with “the cost of military operations running over \$800 million” (310). From the FLN’s perspective, the War of Independence was rooted in the concept of Algeria as an independent nation-state. At the heart of this emerging nationalism was an evolving discussion as to who could be considered “Algerian” (Zack, 55). “The notion of ‘Algerians’ varied from Arab-Islamic elites to anyone committed to an independent nation. Clearly, ‘French’ and ‘Algerian’ were important bases of political identification and solidarity, representing very different visions of a future Algeria” (55). The artificial identity of Pan-Arabism created populist sentiment to the extent that it advanced a unique Algerian brand of nationalism. In this sense, Arab nationalism was presented as an alternative to that of a Franco identity painted onto Algerians. Arabism was borne out of a dialectical framework. In this way, anyone who wanted to be Arab could in Algeria, particularly when identity was such an

important sub-structure to the aspirations of Algerian nationalists who held dreams of re-taking their country from a foreign occupier.

While the ruling classes of the FLN were concerned with solidifying a fragile base of legitimacy, institutional change that created programs of modernization and centralization were the core objectives of the Algerian revolution (Shlaim, 1). This required a reorientation of an Arab national identity within the framework of an expansive socialist ideology. The leftist wave that swept up the FLN served as the main instrument to assert political legitimacy in a culturally diverse setting. Yet, Islam did not offer the same sense of permanent support for an independent nation-state (Shayari, 1). A socialist appeal to the Arab identity was the central political dynamic which complimented the pluralistic, cultural, and linguistically diverse Algeria (1). Conversely, Islamic universalism in its purest form represented a total challenge to the idea of the Algerian state. A guiding principle of Islam is the concept of universalism, which fails to recognize any national identity other than an Islamic one. This strict notion of traditional Islamic values governing society was anathema to the FLN leadership, whose ultimate political goal was to develop a unique Algerian socialism where an independent Algerian state could enter an age of self-sufficient modernity. From the FLN perspective, socialism which improved the lot of society was the vehicle that would return Arab national identity in Algeria to its rightful place.

While both competing conceptions of the nation rejected French colonialism in Algeria, Arab nationalism connected Arabic peoples with the liberation movement in a way where Islam simply faded into the foreground (Fisher and Taub, 1). In many respects, Arab nationalism represented a vision to “recreate a new historical imagination capable of asserting the right of Algerians to join the modern world” through the paradigm of a Pan-Arab direction. In this light, it saw a strict interpretation of Islam as a competing vision for the soul of Algeria. That is not to



say traditional Islamic values did not support the cause for independence. “Islam provided moral support to the independence war. At the time, Algerian nationalism and Islam were so intertwined that individuals who drank alcohol, smoked, or did not fast during Ramadan were considered traitors to the nationalist cause...the society is so profoundly religious that ‘religion is not confined to the private sphere’ since it ‘has never really left the public sphere’” (109).

Similarly, while the main leadership of the FLN was not anti-Islam, the priority was implementing a kind of Arab nationalism that fit the mold of Algeria’s existing social and cultural polity. Islamic features complimented the nationalist struggle for separation. Islamic rebellion served as a tool in the separatist movement where martyrdom occurred not in the name of god, but for the Algerian country and glorified notions of its national life. Correspondingly, suicide terrorism occurred not only in Algeria, but frequently in Paris. Terrorism and generalized violence often possessed the dual identities Islamic radicalism with a nationalist bent. Nonetheless, religion remained in the background in high political decision-making of the FLN.

In Algeria, understanding the era in which Arab national identity unfolded is critical in grasping the greater supranational ideology of Pan-Arabism. In the post-World War II dynamic, the Maghreb is experiencing powerful but separable liberation movements with leftist guerrilla groups aiming to establish national independence on their own terms. The Allied victory in World War II affords a resurgence of imperial spirit within the Fourth Republic. In this sense, Algeria becomes the battleground for France to resolve its position in a changing world order where the binary of Soviet and American influence leaves little space for France on the world stage. Furthermore, the rising FLN leadership is captured by the concept of modernity built around a socialist and communist ideology that was spreading in the East and Third World at this time. They perceived a secular socialism that supports an authoritarian regime of Algerian

nationalism as critical in developing true independence from their French colonizer. Yet, within this ideological belief of a greater Algeria is an argument which suggests that a strict Islamic interpretation handicaps the ability to construct a modern society in a new era where capturing “hearts and minds” is fundamental to the spread of socialism.

From the opposing perspective, France had a substantial investment in Algeria. A significant French settler population resided in Algeria. In this way, France saw Algeria as more than simply an imperial tool from which it can extract goods and bring them back to the homeland. The Fourth Republic held the strong conviction that Algeria is simply an extension of the French empire itself. In this sense, the dominant French administrative perspective located Algeria between that of a colony and an extension of the home territory. Similarly, the reluctance on France’s part to adopt reforms that would integrate the Algerian Muslim population into a democratic system was a source of controversy as the threat of the majority indigenous population marginalizing French pied-noir was probable. Moreover, rather than simply appease nationalist Algerians and provide structural reforms which preserve a Franco presence in Algeria, France doubles down and seeks to diminish the Arabic quality of Algeria with a Franco dialectical identity. France established schools and public systems which enforce the speaking of French as well as French customs and culture. This notion of overwhelming Algeria by imposing an individual cultural identity on a group of people provides the backdrop to how the idea of language, cultural history, and norms became tools of empowerment and domination.

## **PORTRAYAL OF ARAB NATIONAL IDENTITY IN FILM**

In the 1966 film, *The Battle of Algiers*, Italian filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo highlights the struggle of Algerian masses against the violent oppression of their French colonizers. Yet, the

movie delves deeper by offering an interpretation of the roots of identity discontent. The disparity in identity magnified by the divide in the quality of life between pied-noirs and Arabs is fundamental in how Pontecorvo describes the sources which contribute to Algerian nationalism. “This film was composed in an era when Islamic identity was not as important as it is today: there are no mosques, no religion here. Then the keyword was "Arab" (Bradshaw, 1). Functioning as a platform to illustrate the legacy of western colonialism, “the goal of Pontecorvo and his Italian filmmaking crew was to present the FLN as freedom fighters that resorted to terrorist tactics as the only means available to combat the oppression of the French colonizers” (Briley, 1).

Most visibly, the film shows how a purification campaign emerges on the part of Muslim Arabs to cleanse the city of Casbah from drugs and prostitution where they were previously allowed to flourish under French control. While colonial violence and conflict are the archetypal themes of the work, Pontecorvo makes the subtle assertion through interactive depictions between the French settlers and indigenous Algerians that, perhaps, society can be better off when it is governed by its own people. In total, Pontecorvo seems to conclude that the FLN “served as a Marxist-Leninist vanguard of the proletariat by raising the consciousness of the Algerian masses” (1). The broader idea of identity plays right into this dynamic of inequality in how society is managed.

### **ALGERIAN INDEPENDENCE (1962)**

After Algeria won independence from France in 1958, the Arab national identity which had fueled the success of the FLN and its guerrilla warriors turned to address the internal enemies within Algeria. Algerians who had fought on the side of the French, known as Harkis,

numbered close to 250,000 soldiers and fought against their own countryman (1). When France was finally driven out in 1962, the Fifth Republic under the control of Charles de Gaulle welcomed few of them into France (1). Instead, their weapons were confiscated by the French Army.

The majority of Harkis had no choice but to quietly re-integrate themselves back into a transformed Algerian society. Yet, “[the victorious Algerians began to slaughter them, and their families” (Hadden, 1). Serge Karel, an Algerian whose father fought for the French in the Second World War and brother in Indochina, never considered fighting for the Algerian nationalists (1). When France was driven out in 1962, Karel expected to retreat to Europe with his French (1). Yet, he was captured within days and imprisoned. "Each morning my captors paraded me before the townsfolk who would beat me, spit on me and throw rocks at me," □ adding that he “was tortured all over my body. They cut slivers off my tongue with wire cutters. My mouth became so infected I couldn't eat" (1). During this period, the treatment of Harkis by Algerian nationalists represented the dark side of an Arab identity and the violence associated with it. These were acts of revenge which symbolized a violent component manifesting in Algerian nationalism even after the conflict had ended.

Similarly, the expulsion of pied-noir's due to their lack of full Algerian descent despite the fact that they were born and raised in Algeria created a fanaticism within the Arab nationalist culture that later became toxic to an integrated political system. Pan-Arabism no longer merely required a linguistic attribution, but an ethnic quality that transformed the concept of Arabness to better align with pre-conceived notions of race on the part of the FLN and radical Algerian nationalists. Additionally, this also injected a semantical element to the meaning of Algerian descent and identity as well as Arab identity. While many pied-noirs identified as Algerian and

wanted to be a part of the new Algerian social fabric (i.e. Albert Camus), they were refused on the grounds that French blood removed the possibility of Algerian identity even in the face of their background as born and raised in Algeria before independence.

Moreover, even though pied-noirs enjoyed a class of citizenship that Algerians were refused under French rule, a sizeable segment of French settlers supported the cause of self-determination (Oprea, 1). However, the expulsion of pied-noirs despite this inconvenient fact provided the backdrop to examine how Arab identity evolved with the conflict and, ultimately, served as an ethno-centric philosophy. This is an example of Pan-Arabism uniting Algerians, but in an obsessively selective nature to the point where it excluded segments of the population which could have been sympathetic to the cause of an empowered Algerian national identity (Reiser, 220). Although Pan-Arabism in the context of Algeria functioned as a unifying factor, it also alienated certain groups such as the pied-noirs and Harkis.

The research question explores how Algerian nationalism and Pan-Arabism function as unifying identities within the context of the War of Independence. In the final analysis, Arab nationalism in Algeria certainly contributed to the formation of an independent nation-state. It provided a common identity that Algerian nationalists could consolidate for the purpose of national unity. Furthermore, the notion of Arabness within the framework of a nationalist agenda had the effect of minimizing differences of class, wealth, and education among Algerians when challenged by an oppressive French force in their homeland. While Islam was not the central point from which a nationalist identity developed, certain Islamic values and judgements played a role in reinforcing the fundamental objectives of the National Liberation Front. Yet, there is something deeper to the question of French colonial order in Algeria that exposes the success of the Arab separatists in the years 1953-62. In the judgement of this author, a dimension that has

not been analyzed completely by existing literature is the fact that the French could not maintain their position in Algeria for the long-term. Arab Algerians significantly outnumbered that of pied-noirs. Moreover, the moral arc of the Arab nationalist argument in Algeria resonated to the core with a substantial segment of the Arab population. Pan-Arabism swept in hopes that an independent nation could emerge through a distinct Algerian nationalism that tied economic modernity in with colonial resentment.

For this reason, Algerian separatists expressed a willingness to commit violence and atrocities that they deemed justifiable for the nationalist cause. The consequences of the Algerian separatist movement resulted in an independent nation state and an Arab nationalist mood far reaching in the years afterward. However, the question is rarely asked, was independence worth it in light of how much violence and tragedy persisted? From the Algerian nationalist perspective, fighting for your country was central to their being. Yet, following the War of Independence, Algeria never fully transitioned into an era of economic modernity. Subsequently, an Algerian civil war in the 1990s provoked questions as to the long term sustainability of an Algerian national identity rooted in socialism. Yet, having said that, Arab nationalism informed by the more global Pan-Arabist movement of the time spoke to the dreams and aspirations of the Algerian people. In that regard, Algerian nationalism and Pan-Arabism did successfully function as unifying identities during the Algerian War of Independence.



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