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Hot Spot Research Paper: Algeria

by Frank Giunti

(History 2235)

History has a way of presenting itself in current times, whether that be through things seen before, or the scars left from the past. Algeria currently is suffering scars from the past left by the French, which go as far back as 1830 when Algeria was first colonized by the French. Like many other African nations that would become engulfed under a foreign power much later in what is known as the Scramble for Africa, Algeria was no different. However, in the case of Algeria, it was more than just being oppressed by a foreign power; Algeria was fighting for national identity, for what it meant to be “Algerian”, and for “Algeria for the Algerians.” The French sought to envelop the Algerians into becoming more like France, but the Algerians clung to their culture and made sure that losing it would never be an option. Beginning with the initial colonialization to current day Algeria, events such as various protests against French policy, The War for Independence, the Civil War, all tie to French colonialism and occupation of Algeria, and are seen in the civil unrest facing Algeria in modern times.

The current state of Algeria has seen protests from various groups all revolving around the idea of what the society as a whole needs. The Algerian people feel, “that the state is at once absent in areas that should make life easier and over-present in areas that make life harder or more bureaucratic.”¹ The areas where the citizens felt the most attention is needed include “infrastructure, housing and labor disputes.”² These protests happened daily, so frequently that through a study in 2011, it was found that there were “18 interventions by riot police per day.”³ The current state of Algeria is very strongly rooted around the ideas of social justice, or in their case the lack of it which is called *hogra*, which is where these protests stem from. Through this belief of *hogra*, the Algerians following this belief have, “a bitter disappointment and outrage that the state has not lived up to its promises, reflecting a sense of having been cheated by history and a deep split in state–society relations.”⁴ Algerians believe that they have been cheated beginning from post French colonialization. After the removal of the French, Algerians were promised democracy, and at the first attempt of it in 1992 where the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the first round of the new elections, the election was suspended and the FLN continued to hold the power of Algeria.

Algerians believe that the sole focus of the government is to make their lives harder, where evidence like “daily power cuts in the sweltering heat of the south caused rioting and protests in a number of oasis cities”⁵ only furthers this belief that the state lacks attention to its people. The current problem Algeria faces is one where there seems to be a great divide between the people of Algeria and those in charge of the state. “Popular notions of what constitute positive state–society relations remain largely defined by the past desire to overcome the humiliations of colonialism through the self-proclaimed objectives of the independent state: equality, redistribution of wealth, dignity and often a sense of personal involvement in making the country a better place.”⁶ As

¹ McAllister, Edward. 2012. “The Past in the Present: Algeria at 50.” *Mediterranean Politics* 17 (3): 449.

² McAllister, Edward. 2012. “The Past in the Present: Algeria at 50.” *Mediterranean Politics* 17 (3): 449.

³ McAllister, Edward. 2012. “The Past in the Present: Algeria at 50.” *Mediterranean Politics* 17 (3): 449.

⁴ McAllister, Edward. 2012. “The Past in the Present: Algeria at 50.” *Mediterranean Politics* 17 (3): 450.

⁵ McAllister, Edward. 2012. “The Past in the Present: Algeria at 50.” *Mediterranean Politics* 17 (3): 450.

⁶ McAllister, Edward. 2012. “The Past in the Present: Algeria at 50.” *Mediterranean Politics* 17 (3): 450.

mentioned, the potential agreement that would solidify positive relations among the masses and the state are simple, live up to the promises made following French departure from Algeria. The reason why there are many protests with similar beliefs and not a unified protest arises from a widespread protest that occurred in 1988.

This protest in 1988 resulted in “harsh repression of young rioters by the army, which represented a turning point for many in their parents’ generation, whose belief in the postcolonial system was shattered by the hitherto unimaginable scenes of the army turning its guns on the people.”⁷ This resulted in the disbanding of a major protest, and left protests scattered so that another incident like this would never happen again. By this one event leading to the military taking action against its own civilians, the hope for a unified rally against the current system was stopped. Had the Algerian government followed through with the promises made after independence from France, the divide between the Algerian people and the Algerian state would not be as great as it is currently. This connects with the Algerian Civil War because of the rise of jihadist groups following the tainted election that should have secured the FIS control over the government. The civilians rightfully elected the FIS and had a strong following for them and after witnessing that the government would not acknowledge the FIS preliminary victory, it sparked jihadist groups to form as a counter for the government. The split between the government and these radical groups is seen again in modern day with the increasing number of protestors towards the current status of the government. This is rooted back to French colonialism because after securing independent Algeria, the FLN were left in charge of running the government, but through their ruling it has led to this current conflict facing the state of Algeria as a whole.

As mentioned, this problem began with the initial colonization of Algeria by France. This began “throughout the 1830s, and especially after 1840, France waged a scorched earth battle for control over first the coastal and then the interior regions of Algeria. Civilian Algerians were specifically targeted by the French Army of Africa, and the French military presence in Algeria numbered in the tens of thousands.”⁸ The French came in with a fury, instead of simply applying themselves to the area, they came in guns blazing hoping to squash any initial opposition. As well as overwhelming them militarily, they also treated the Algerians as second class citizens. One economist, Eugène Buret, was quoted depicting “the proletariat as beaten down by economic and cultural deprivation, ‘excluded from civilization,’ and lacking even the traditions and ‘savage grandeur’ of ‘true’ barbarians.”⁹ As was common with colonizers, they denounced the culture and the inhabitants as “savages” or “barbarians” because these Algerians were nothing like the French and seen as far less civilized and not as developed as modern Europeans. Another key characteristic exhibited by colonizers, it always appears that they got involved with these colonies for the benefit of the colony but actually it was to benefit France, “European settlers constructed and represented the indigenous population as inferior and uncivilized and used these stereotypes to justify their economic exploitation and political and social marginalization.”¹⁰ Instead of trying to motivate and advance Algeria into more modernization, Algeria became a tool of exploitation by the French for resources, while never shifting from their original position of modernization. This initial contact with the French began the anti-French sentiment felt within the country of Algeria.

After the rapid takeover of Algeria by the French forces, it was not long after where the Algerians struck back. It was in 1881 where a revolt of common school-aged individuals “marked a

⁷ McAllister, Edward. 2012. “The Past in the Present: Algeria at 50.” *Mediterranean Politics* 17 (3): 450.

⁸ Andrews, Naomi J. 2018. “Selective Empathy: Workers, Colonial Subjects, and the Affective Politics of French Romantic Socialism.” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 36 (1): 2. doi:10.3167/fpcs.2018.360101.

⁹ Andrews Selective Empathy, 3.

¹⁰ Francis, Kyle. 2018. “‘Algeria for the Algerians’: Public Education and Settler Identity in the Early Third Republic.” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 36 (1): 28. doi:10.3167/fpcs.2018.360102.

turning point away from assimilation with the official enactment of the indigénat legal code, which subjected all those defined as indigènes to a separate regime of legal exclusion.”¹¹ Algeria did not want to become assimilated, or forced into becoming more like the French, but rather continue their culture and language. The French also tried a policy known as association, which drew upon building a relationship between the French colonizers and the Algerians, but Algerians again were not allowing this policy to go about, Algerians wanted their culture. This revolt was brought about by the misunderstanding of school officials and one administrator’s ignorance. M. Goy was an administrator at a school in Mustapha, having heard about this new order allowing the students of the school to exempt themselves of the Catholic teachings and events he simply refused to allow it. Goy wanted these students to follow the Catholic teachings that Algerians refused to follow, considering the majority of the country follows the religion of Islam. “M. Goy, himself a new arrival from France, refused to accept the letters and instead accused the students of forging their parents’ signatures. As we have seen, Goy also forbade the students from attending the public celebrations in honor of Victor Hugo’s birthday and forced them instead to attend Catholic religious processions.”¹² Despite this uprising being solely at the hands of M. Goy with his refusal to accept these exemption slips, he in turn “placed the blame for the revolt squarely on these Algerian-born students.”¹³ This only led to more issues when students were then “involved in the disappearance of teaching materials from many classrooms, the materials were never recovered but a letter was found in a student’s room for a magazine ‘Le Petit Colon’ which was signed by the rebelling students.”¹⁴ The action he then took was to expel the twelve rebelling students, who happened to be Algerians.

Through one man’s refusal to allow these students exemption from forced religious ceremonies, he led to revolts within the school, and the expulsion of students protesting their rights. Though this event was incredibly localized, it marked a shift for the Algerians to fight back against their forced assimilation into French culture which was oppressing them in this instance by forcing their beliefs onto them and not allowing them to celebrate the events like the Victor Hugo’s birthday that they had celebrated previously. By this simple revolt, it demonstrated that the Algerians would not allow themselves to be assimilated into the beliefs the French were forcing onto them, but rather stand strong to their own heritage and culture, further pushing the ideal of what it means to be Algerian.

Though the students fought hard to fight the assimilation of the French, it was to no avail. According to “Abdelrahman Salameh, laws discouraging the use of Arabic date back to as early as 1904 when the teaching of Arabic literature and Arab history was not allowed in schools and colleges.”¹⁵ By taking away their native language and history and replacing it with that of the French, it was an attempt to fully immerse Algerians into a role of second class citizenship by disregarding their history and everything they knew and replacing it with whatever the French dictated. Instead of the traditional Arabic that the Algerians were so accustomed to using, the French replaced it with their language, French. This change was seen throughout society as well, “French became the only language of administration and instruction, and was used exclusively on signposts and public posters.”¹⁶ By fully immersing the Algerians in this new language, this set them at a large disadvantage. With administration, instruction, signposts, and posters being in the French language, how were Algerians expected to understand this foreign language? This left the potential for exploitation because common Algerians had no understanding of what this language was or how to

¹¹ Francis Algeria for the Algerians, 33.

¹² Francis Algeria for the Algerians, 34.

¹³ Francis Algeria for the Algerians, 34.

¹⁴ Francis Algeria for the Algerians, 34

¹⁵ Abu-Haidar, Farida. 2000. “Arabisation in Algeria.” *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 3 (3): 152.

¹⁶ Abu-Haidar, Farida, *Arabisation in Algeria*, 152.

interpret it, almost as if they were the foreigners in their own land. By forcing this new language onto Algerians, the feeling of Algeria being manipulated by the French only increased. This led to radical groups such as the FLN who wanted Algeria to only be for the people of Algeria, by changing the language and forcing it onto a group of people who only spoke Arabic, it was a blatant attempt at full assimilation and the understanding that Algerians were not in control of their own country.

Tensions only grew after the Student Revolt of 1881 and policies subjecting the Algerians to assimilate into French culture. It was not long after where the French were thrown into World War I, and with them came the Algerians, the French began pulling members of this colony to fight at their front lines. It was estimated that “the French would mobilize around 173,000 Algerians, with some 125,000 seeing action on the battlefield; 73,000 troops from the colony’s European settler population would also fight on the battlefields of the Great War.”¹⁷ These numbers were made up of Algerians who were conscripted into service as well as “volunteers” who were said to be heavily coerced into enlisting. With their service in World War I, “the French government moved to reward the service of its Algerian subjects by introducing limited colonial reform.”¹⁸ Though they were given a little reform, the issue was that these veterans of the war wanted to be treated like French citizens, not ostracized in their own country and treated like second class citizens. This was only highlighted when “the moderate Fédération des Élus Musulmans Algériens declared ‘we are French soldiers, we want to be French citizens’, while the Islamist reformists of the Association des ‘Ulama Musulmans Algériens highlighted the contradiction in a policy that judged Algerians worthy ‘of dying in the horrible chaos’ of the battlefield but unworthy of enjoying the rights of citizenship.”¹⁹ The same thing happened during World War II when the Algerians yet again were pulled into the war, only to return home again as second class citizens. This led to unrest in the colony which then sparked “a nationalist-inspired riot that broke out at the Victory in Europe Day parade in the city of Sétif on 8 May 1945, the civil and military authorities responded with a brutal campaign of repression, burning villages, interning tens of thousands of locals and engaging in summary executions.”²⁰ Tensions between Algeria and France had finally hit a boiling point, and the Algerians were finally ready to take a stand.

The Algerians began the War of Independence against their French colonizers; it began in 1954 and continued until 1962. Algerians were then split into two categories, The Partisans of L’Algérie Française and the National Liberation Front (FLN). The FLN were seen as radicals as they fought for a united Algeria, while the partisans of L’Algérie Française were more so French sympathizers and sided with the French. The beliefs exhibited by both sides were that, “The partisans of L’Algérie Française, used the presence of Muslim veterans at commemorative ceremonies to refute allegations of racism and celebrate the ‘Franco-Muslim fraternity’ that they claimed underpinned the colonial order. The FLN or National Liberation Front and its supporters embraced narratives of the past focused on the resistance of the Algerian people to colonialism, leaving little room for the ambiguous stories of the Algerian soldiers of the First and the Second World Wars.”²¹

One key event really separated these two groups of Algerians, the unveiling of the Muslim women. “In the midst of the uprising that threatened to overthrow France’s government, and that quickly led to the return to power of General Charles de Gaulle, thousands of ‘Muslim’ Algerians were brought in from villages of Algiers to shower support for French ‘fraternity’ and for ‘L’Algérie

¹⁷ Hassett, Dónal. 2018. “Contested Commemoration: The Great War, Memory and Politics in Contemporary Algeria.” *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 21 (3–4): 211.

¹⁸ Hassett Contested Commemoration, 212.

¹⁹ Hassett Contested Commemoration, 213.

²⁰ Hassett Contested Commemoration, 213.

²¹ Hassett Contested Commemoration, 213.

Française”²² This did not sit well with the FLN because they really needed to rally every Algerian around the idea of getting the colonizers out of their country, this was a big hit to that. “The FLN leadership denounced the ‘Muslim’ women who had participated as ‘all-around maids of the General Government as well as boarders of whorehouses.’”²³ Frantz Fanon, an FLN cadre was also said to say those unveiled women were “‘servants under the threat of being fired, poor women dragged from their homes, or prostitutes’”²⁴ The overall attitude towards those Muslim women selected by the French to be the poster people of the L’Algérie Française was anger and confusion, the FLN felt that everyone knew what was happening to the Algerian people in Algeria and that anyone siding with the enemy was no better than the enemy themselves. There were distinct lines between the FLN and the members of the L’Algérie Française, and the FLN never understood the reasoning to not be on their side of the argument. By the French attempting to divide the two opposing groups of Algerians, it was a direct attack on what the FLN was attempting, solidifying Algeria as one. The French attempted through the display of the unveiling these women to cause a divide between the FLN and the L’Algérie Française, thus in theory weakening the power of the FLN in resistance.

During the Algerian War for Independence, one of the interesting things the Algerians did was to not fight in a traditional manor, but rather fight secretly in a sort of guerilla warfare. Though guerilla warfare had been seen before, the Algerians went about it in a different way. While the idea of guerilla warfare revolves around sneak attacks, the Algerians developed a new way that had not been seen before, they used women. “On 30 September Zohra Drif, Djamila Bouhired and Samia Lakhdari, veiled, attended a meeting with Yacef in one of his Casbah hideouts. They were told that, the same afternoon, they were to place three bombs in the heart of European Algiers.”²⁵ This strategy was not only to directly impact the European sector of Algeria, but to also send a message and avenge the Muslim children who were killed in the Rue de Thebes outrage. These women were selected because they could easily pass for European and they would be able to carry out the act without any problems because they could sneak around undetected by anyone. They were able to blend in with people around them because they themselves were members of the bourgeoisie as well as students in a university. Zohra Drif was to put her bomb at a location known as the Milk-Bar which was quite popular, and when her bomb detonated “the carnage was particularly appalling in the Milk-Bar, where the heavy glass covering the walls was shattered into lethal splinters. Altogether there were three deaths and over fifty injured, including a dozen with amputated limbs, among them several children.”²⁶ Her mission had been successful, it seemed like an eye for an eye to the Algerians, they had only retaliated after what had happened after the outrage at the Rue de Thebes, where the French planted a bomb that killed innocent women and children civilians and was the first attack by both sides on civilians.

Many instances of this “terrorism” were seen affecting various areas of Algeria, all carefully planned attacks to areas under the French control. These attacks like the one committed by Zohra Drif were orchestrated in a way to affect French areas, almost as if it were attacking the French directly, as well as hitting civilians as had the French previously did to the Algerians with the Rue de Thebes outrage. These areas affected, for example the Milk-Bar, were common places for actual French people to inhabit, and by making it a target it, it was an attack designated to only affect French citizens. The war raged on for years until finally the FLN emerged victorious and Algeria was

²² Shepard, Todd. *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008, 187.

²³ Shepard, Todd. *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*, 187.

²⁴ Shepard, Todd. *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*, 188.

²⁵ Horne, Alistair Allan. *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954-1962*. New York: New York Review Books, 2006, 185.

²⁶ Horne, Alistair Allan. *A Savage War of Peace*, 186.

a free state. Post war, the new leader of Algeria was a man by the name of Ben Bella who was a member of the FLN, and with that the FLN claimed authority over the newly independent state of Algeria.

The war was ended by a treaty known as the “Evian Agreements” which then announced Algeria an independent country on July 1st. This agreement was brought up to the French people for a vote on whether Algeria should become independent, “On 8 April de Gaulle’s referendum for the French people to declare their opinion on the Evian Agreements returned a massive vote of ninety per cent of ouis (yes) among those who polled.”²⁷ The overwhelming support of the French for the independence of their former territory only solidified the necessity for Algeria to become their own country. The Algerians had finally secured the reins to their own country, no longer would they be oppressed by the French, and finally they could begin to build themselves without intervention. The FLN stayed in power throughout the rebuilding of Algeria, first beginning with FLN leader Ahmed Ben Bella, then after a few other FLN members when he eventually retired. Though while under government control due to a state of emergency in 1992, there were supposed to be elections and through these elections a group known as the FIS had won by a large majority. Due to the governments suspending these elections despite FIS victory, this became the pivotal moment that plunged Algeria into a brutal Civil War that led to mass casualties of civilians and the future protests of the new President of Algeria. Throughout FLN-run Algeria, some leaders were unfortunately assassinated fairly early in their careers, while others like former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika had a term that lasted from 1999-2019, where he was eventually ousted from the government due to immense protests from youth protestors. It was only recently where the distrust and anger spawned from people under FLN rule, due to failure to listen to the citizens of Algeria, and failure to follow through with promises once made after independence.

Algeria had managed to live in harmony under the various FLN leaders after their independence from France up until the Civil War which started in 1992. The Civil War arose from the failure to follow the democratic system promised to the people after the initial independence from France. “In December 1991, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the first round of legislative elections. The government suspended the second round of voting on 11 January 1992, putting an end to the democratic process.”²⁸ The suspension of the elections led to many Algerians feeling that the promise of democracy was a lie, seeing how a large majority of people supported the FIS only to have the militant government not allow for them to lead. As a result of this tainted election, “The authorities declared a state of emergency on 9 February 1992, banned the FIS, and arrested its leadership as well as thousands of its sympathizers, who were placed in detention centers in the south of the country. The brutal repression and indiscriminate violence by security forces contributed to the radicalization of thousands of Algerians.”²⁹ This rapid turn of events only furthered the divide between the two sides, those in favor of the FIS and those in favor of the old system of government, based solely around the military. As a result of this divide, according to the extremist wing of the FIS, the only answer was to “launch the first calls for jihadism and began a campaign against the security forces. In the years that followed, the country witnessed the birth of a plethora of jihadist groups.”³⁰ With the creation of all of these new jihadist groups, there seemed to be a problem of who to actually follow, considering the party that was once the FIS was quashed. That was when the newly formed Armed Islamic Group (GIA) gained support over the other jihadist groups by their ideas of “fighting against *dawlet el taghut* (impious state), and for the establishment of *dawla*

²⁷ Horne, A Savage War of Peace, 529-530.

²⁸ Ghanem-Yazbeck, Dalia. 2017. “Challenging Fieldwork: Researching Large-Scale Massacres in Algeria.” *Anthropology Matters Journal* 17 (2): 30.

²⁹ Ghanem-Yazbeck, Dalia. “Challenging Fieldwork: Researching Large-Scale Massacres in Algeria.” 30.

³⁰ Ghanem-Yazbeck, Dalia. “Challenging Fieldwork: Researching Large-Scale Massacres in Algeria.” 30.

Islamiya (Islamic state).³¹ Following this newfound support, the GIA took measures into their own hands and began to combat the state which was under control of the military. This prompted many massacres in the name of gaining a following and securing that everyone knew that they were serious about their demands. One of their beliefs in the attempt to gain *dawla Islamiya* was that the only solution was for violence. The GIA turned the violence onto its own citizens in many attacks that left thousands dead, because of the lack of support for jihadist groups and their use of violence that they claimed was essential for avenging the problematic elections. The damage done by some of these massacres was monumental, “On the night of 22 September 1997, the GIA attacked the hamlet of Bentalha (thirty kilometres southeast of Algiers), carried out horrendous acts, and killed some 417 individuals with axes, swords, and knives. On 30 December 1997, the villages of Kherarba, Ouled Sahnine, and Ouled Tayeb (in the Ouarsenis mountains in north-western Algeria) were attacked by GIA men, and 386 people were massacred.”³² The sheer number of people killed during these two attacks is incredible, these rebel groups stirred up a lot of chaos and left civilians terrified for the fear that they would be next.

These widespread massacres continued up until the eventual election of President Bouteflika, but with the addition of a new policy of amnesty, he was able to lessen the tensions within Algeria. He extended this offer to many of the rebel groups who were involved with the massacres and according to him, “some 6,000 former Islamic guerrillas had responded to the amnesty, surrendered their arms and returned to their homes. ‘Without any doubt, when it comes to men and to weapons, the problem is 99 per cent solved, certainly as far as weapons and arms are concerned.’”³³ After the issuance of this policy, the violence lessened after many former guerilla soldiers laid down their arms and went back to their normal lives.

This period of time could be tied back to French imperialism due to the fact that after the victory of the FLN, they were then the sole group in charge of now running a country. The FLN had maintained power for so long that they believed they were doing well enough, but when the presidential elections came up and they realized that they were not set to win, they stopped the idea of democracy and clung to the power that they could still maintain. It was under government rule that these rebel groups were formed by the tainted election, and all of the hostility spawned from that moment. This in turn led to the recent protests against the President of Algeria, all arising from the handling of the elections and the Civil War that resulted from them.

French imperialism in Algeria was not only felt in the moment of it happening, but it left deep scars that would remain in the country indefinitely. Though the French had left in 1962, the scope of what they had done found its way back into the limelight and impacted their society in these modern times. Through the rough beginnings of the French entering the country in a fury, to the revolt with the students, to the Algerian War for Independence, and even modern times with the tainted elections and protests against the militant government, the French conquest of Algeria could be seen in these events. The French influence in the region brought nothing but hardships for the people of Algeria, and when they finally left after a brutal war, they left the Algerians to rebuild themselves and forge a new identity. Algeria had not been independent since before 1830, they had culture and traditions, but had no idea how to run a newly formed nation. They were left with the question of what it meant to be “Algerian.” Though the FLN did what they could to run the newly formed country, by tainting the elections and basically squashing the attempt for democracy, they only caused more problems and led to the surge of newly formed jihadist groups and the massacres of civilians. As a result of these massacres of civilians during the Civil War, this tied directly into the recent protests faced by the President of Algeria. After many years of the Civil War, Algeria still

³¹ Ghanem-Yazbeck, Dalia. “Challenging Fieldwork: Researching Large-Scale Massacres in Algeria.” 31.

³² Ghanem-Yazbeck, Dalia. “Challenging Fieldwork: Researching Large-Scale Massacres in Algeria.” 32.

³³ Thomas, Karen. 2000. “Crunch Time for Bouteflika.” *Middle East*, no. 300 (April): 8.

struggles with the current authority of the country, where protesting and violence are still common. Once the societal needs and the promises made after independence can be met, then Algeria may find the peace they had once had after the initial liberation from control of the French.

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