

French-Algerian Relations: The Weight of History

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Introduction

In 1974, Algeria's President Houari Boumediene declared that, "Relations between France and Algeria may be good or bad, but in no way can they be trivial." Twenty-six years later, in 2000, his long-time foreign minister and now Algeria's President, Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999-present) declared that, "Algeria seeks to have extraordinary, non trivial, not normal, [but] exemplary and exceptional relations with France." Yet, despite this willingness to turn the page, which, as Boumediene suggested, "cannot be torn up," relations have often been marred with misunderstandings, conflicts, mutual suspicions and mistrust. Under President Jacques Chirac's presidency, it seemed that the two countries were heading toward a historic treaty of friendship in 2005. Unfortunately as is often the case, a deceitful incident, concocted in Paris by forces opposed to lasting reconciliation between the two countries, derailed that process. Following a promising start under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy, relations quickly went from bad to worse, at least until the last couple of months which seem to have augured yet another hopeful development in relations, as is customary: through economic relations. What are the main obstacles in Franco-Algerian relations? Can they be overcome? What are the reasons for the current seeming rejuvenation of those relations? It is extremely difficult to write a short essay on the so-complex Algerian-French relations. Therefore, I will review some of the most salient factors which have impeded better ties between these two Mediterranean countries whose fate is bound by inescapable historical, political, economic, cultural, and human dimensions.

The Weight of History

On 5 July 2012, Algeria will be celebrating its 50th anniversary of independence from France, independence that it wrested following 132 years of colonization and 8 years of a "savage war for peace" which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Algerians. Algerians suffered not only from that devastating war, but also from the colonial years during which the French dispossessed Algerian Muslims of the best lands, pillaged the country's resources, and prevented the native population from access to education, among other crimes. It is precisely France's refusal to acknowledge the crimes that it committed in Algeria that has represented one of the main stumbling blocks to complete reconciliation. In Algeria, there is no disagreement between state and society with regard to France's colonial past. In their collective memory Algerians have stored the massacres committed during the colonial period, the denial of their right to citizenship (Code de l'Indigénat), the famines and impoverishment that followed the colonial conquest, resulting in the loss of one third of the native population between 1830 and 1870, the massacres of May 1945, the massacres of 11 December 1960, and the murders committed by the Organization of the Secret Army (OAS) between 1960 and 1962.

The massacres of 8 May 1945 have left an indelible mark in the collective memory. Abdelaziz Bouteflika pointed out that "the fierce campaign that was conducted [8 May 45] on behalf of the French state has made tens of thousands of victims, whose number has never been accurately determined, although our national memory recorded symbolically 45,000 martyrs." The War of National Liberation (also known as Algerian Revolution or War of Independence) has in turn contributed significantly to the forming of Algerian identity. Support for Palestine or the Sahrawis and other national liberation movements is simply the logical expression of that identity. This explains why Algerians resent the questioning by the French of this expression; it is perceived as a real injury and a denial of Algerians' national identity. Algerians also wonder why France waited until 1999 to admit that "the events in Algeria" were more than a mere "police action," but a real war. This ambivalence strengthens the conviction that France still does not accept the reality of Algeria's independence.

An objective analysis shows that Algerians do not require France's "repentance" (a religious term); what they insist on is the recognition by the French government of the crimes that French colonization committed in Algeria between 1830 and 1962. When President Jacques Chirac denounced in 2005 the colonial violence in Madagascar in 1947 and encouraged the recognition by the French government of the Armenian genocide by omitting any reference to the evils of colonialism in Algeria, the reaction in Algeria was intense. It is virtually impossible to find Algerians who subscribe to the idea that French colonization in Algeria was a "civilizing mission" and that France's goal was to bring prosperity to the Algerian people.

One of the factors responsible for the deterioration of Algerian-French relations occurred following the proclamation of the Law of 23 February 2005, which praised the positive aspects of colonialism. Although the passage was later stricken out by the Constitutional Council, Algerians never forgot that it had been pronounced and that many in France's political class still hold that view. In fact, since then, Algerians have demanded, under one formulation or another, that France recognizes the "genocide of our [Algerian] identity, history, language and customs" [Bouteflika, 17 April 2006]. Such statements always elicit a strong reaction in France.

Following the 2008 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Libya and Italy, its former colonial power (1911-1943), whereby Italy presented an apology for its crimes and agreed to pay compensation, Algerians raised the question as to why France would not do the same, especially since Chirac had in 1995 recognized the French State's responsibility in the deportation of Jews during the WWII. President Sarkozy's efforts to introduce studies about the Holocaust in primary schools in France while refusing to acknowledge France's colonial crimes has been perceived as the practice of double standards. Worse still, his move to honor the "harka" (Algerians who collaborated with the French colonial forces against their brethren) and the ultra-nationalists who gave birth to the OAS could not but provoke resentment and uproar in Algeria. Truly, the question of France's recognition of its crimes remains a major issue in Franco-Algerian relations. Although this question gets put on the backburner once in a while, there is no doubt that it will reemerge before Algeria's celebration of the 50th anniversary of independence.

Nonetheless, this question is exploited by various parties in both France and Algeria for domestic purposes. In France, the objective is to appeal to the far-right electorate and/or respond to the wishes of the anti-Algerian lobby, while in Algeria the authoritarian regime uses the question of "historical memory" to reject any France's criticism toward the regime, one on hand, and to preserve its "historical legitimacy" on the other. In 1992, for instance, Algerians reacted with rage against President François Mitterrand's public condemnation of the cancelation of the electoral process following the Islamic Salvation Front's victory in the legislative voting. In 1999, when France raised concerns about the transparency of the presidential election, Bouteflika accused France of regarding Algeria as a "protectorate," and asked that it should abandon its "fixation" with his country. Paradoxically, this did not prevent Bouteflika from making an official visit to France the following year, the first of an Algeria head of state since Chadli Bendjedid's in 1983 which also marked an end to the almost decade-long animosity between the two countries. Bouteflika made a second official state visit in 2004; his planned visit for 2009 never materialized due to the strained relations. For his part, Chirac had visited Algeria three times (2001, 2003, and 2004), a promising period in Franco-Algerian relations.

Whatever the quality of the relations at any given point in time, the weight of history always has considerable impact on those relations. For example, in February 2010, former foreign minister Bernard Kouchner provoked an uproar in Algeria when he declared that the "generation of Algeria's independence is still in power; after it is gone, maybe things will be more simple." For Algerians, this was interference in the country's domestic affairs and yet another proof, if need be, of France's refusal to accept Algeria's independence. Kouchner had visited Algeria in May 2008; not until June 2011 would a French foreign minister visit Algeria.

Contentious Issues in Franco-Algerian Relations

In 2007, Franco-Algerian relations were at low ebb despite Sarkozy's visit to Algeria in December 2007. As revealed in the published WikiLeaks cables, his visit was primarily to collect information on Bouteflika's health (he had been treated in France in 2005 for serious illness). The other objective was to promote French business in the country; France was being displaced by other countries, such as China, which had obtained major projects worth billions of dollars.

Tension in relations was already evident soon after Sarkozy's election in May 2007. Algeria, for instance, reacted cautiously to Sarkozy's initiative, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). The French sought to convince Algerians that the UfM would be for Franco-Algerian relations what the Economic Community was for Franco-German relations, that is, a framework for rapprochement and reconciliation. While this might have been tempting for the Algerians, once that initiative fell under

the EU's patronage, Algerians did not see the necessity to play an active role in it and joined as mere member. The other reasons Algerians did not provide full support for the initiative was because its success depended on two unresolved issues: conflict in Western Sahara, which was waiting for a referendum on self-determination and the Palestinian issue which necessitated the creation of a viable, secure state.

Since the inception of the conflict in 1975, France has always sided with Morocco against the Algerian-backed Sahrawis. Algerians have always perceived that support as detrimental to regional stability and as denial of the legitimate rights of Sahrawis. For France, on the contrary, Western Sahara is a destabilizing factor for the Moroccan monarchy and for the kingdom in which it has considerable interests. Algerians had mistakenly calculated that Sarkozy might be less pro-Moroccan than his predecessor was. However, soon after his inauguration, Sarkozy made clear that he would pursue France's traditional policy. In fact, under Sarkozy, France provided full backing to the April 2007 monarchy's proposal of "autonomy" to Sahrawis in lieu of the referendum on self-determination as stipulated in UN resolutions.

Under President Sarkozy relations continued to worsen. Thus, in August 2008, the Algerian diplomat, Mohamed Ziane Hasseni, Chief of Protocol in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was arrested at the Marseille airport; he was accused of having ordered the assassination in 1987 of the France-based Algerian opponent, Ali Mecili. Algerians described the arrest as a case of hostage-taking. The accused claimed, correctly, that he was a victim of mistaken identity. Algerians were persuaded that the arrest was politically motivated. In 2010, Hasseni was acquitted in August 2010, but the affair had poisoned Franco-Algerian relations for two years.

In the meantime, in 2009, another event came to complicate relations between the two countries. Indeed, a French officer suggested that the French monks who had been assassinated in Tibhirine (south of Algiers) in 1996 by the Armed Islamic Group had in fact been killed accidentally by the Algerian army in a failed rescue operation. Sarkozy called on the Algerian government to cooperate with the French authorities, arguing that "relations between great states are based on truth, not on lies;" this attitude infuriated Algerians who saw this allegation as an attempt to discredit Algeria's Armed Forces. The story died a slow death and it seems that it was indeed the GIA that assassinated the monks.

A further contentious issue relates to nuclear-weapons testing conducted by France in the Sahara during the 1960s. In May 2009, Algeria's foreign minister Mourad Medelci declared that France should not just pay compensation to those Algerians whose health was alleged to have been affected by the tests, but that it should also take measures to decontaminate the area where the tests were undertaken. In January 2010 France decided to add Algeria to a list of countries whose citizens were deemed to represent a threat to French national security; visitors arriving in France from Algeria were henceforth to be subject to increased security measures upon their arrival at French air and seaports. The decision prompted strong protests within Algeria and resulted in the postponement of a planned visit to Algiers by the French Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, Bernard Kouchner. In an attempt to alleviate the crisis, in February Sarkozy dispatched the Secretary-General of the Presidency, Claude Guéant, for talks with Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia, Medelci and other high-level officials. In June Claude Guéant again travelled to Algeria to meet with President Bouteflika and other senior officials.

Other contentious issues in Franco-Algerian relations relate to immigration, the restriction of visas granted to Algerians to visit France, the debate in France on "national identity," a debate interpreted as targeting French citizens of Algerian origin, as well as Muslims in general, France's threat to no longer recognize dual-citizenship, thus forcing its holders to choose one or the other, also an action targeting French of Algerian origin, are just a few of the litigious questions. Algeria is also resentful of France's paying ransoms to the Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to free French hostages. Algeria sees such payments as funding of terrorists since the ransom money is used for the purchase of weapons.

In the last few months, there have been important visits to Algiers by high-level French officials. Former Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, nicknamed Mr. Algeria, has made several visits, as Sarkozy's special envoy. His objective has been to revitalize Franco-Algerian relations. During his last visit in early June 2011, Raffarin succeeded in cleaning out several economic dossiers, thus opening the way to improved economic ties between the two countries. Commercial relations between Algeria and France have been quite good, the latter being Algeria's main supplier (14.17% of Algeria's imports). But, in recent years, France has faced serious competition from China, which now ranks a close second to France with 13.60% of Algeria's imports. France wishes to reestablish its preeminent business presence in Algeria, as illustrated by the resolution of 12 major investment deals that have been unblocked by Raffarin. Foreign Minister Alain Juppé's visit to Algiers on 15 June 2011, which followed a flurry of other ministerial visits, was meant to give a political seal to the economic agreements that are being negotiated, but also to discuss the Libyan situation, yet another contentious issue between the two countries. Algerians, who are staunch opponents of foreign interventions, do not quite understand France's all-out involvement in Libya. Algerians also claim that France's intervention in Libya threatens the security in the Sahara-Sahel region, where AQIM has its bases.

It is too early to predict whether there will be a breakthrough in Franco-Algerian relations in the next few months. However, one can already speculate that part of France's renewed interest in Algeria is underpinned by electoral interests at home. Algeria also represents an important market for France's manufactured products. Moreover, Algeria's considerable financial reserves whet the appetite of flagging French small and medium enterprises. For its part, the authoritarian regime in Algeria is worried about a potential uprising similar to the ones occurring in the Arab world; therefore, good relations with and support from France, fearful of the resurgence of radical Islamism, can be reassuring. But, such calculations are not without serious risks, as illustrated by the Tunisian case.

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