

POLICY BRIEF

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Valérie Niquet is senior fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs and head of the Asia department at Foundation for Strategic Research. She writes extensively on Asia-Pacific strategic affairs and security. Her latest book include *L'Indo-Pacifique nouveau centre du monde* publication date: 2024. You can follow her on twitter @V.Niquet

History, Territory, and Diplomacy Between France and Algeria: lessons from a crisis for Asian countries

Valérie Niquet

Introduction

Territorial disputes and the instrumentalization of history for political purposes are often associated with regions like Asia, where nations such as the People's Republic of China (PRC) engage in conflicts over historical grievances and territorial claims with neighboring countries. The objective of these conflicts is not related to historical issues but to contemporary power rivalry and ambition to assert China's domination over its neighbors and prevent their emergence as legitimate strategic competitors. However, these issues are not confined to Asia; they are prevalent in other parts of the world, including Europe and its neighboring regions and a comparative analysis should help to understand better, in Europe, the challenges that some countries in Asia are facing. A pertinent example is the complex and often contentious relationship between France and Algeria, more than 60 years after the end of the Algeria War of Independence. The legacy of colonialism, struggles over fragile national identity, and ongoing diplomatic tensions have profoundly shaped the interactions between these two nations despite the constant mention, in France of the special relationship between the two people. This article delves into the historical context of France's colonization of Algeria, examines recent developments influencing their bilateral relations, and analyzes how historical disputes are utilized within Algeria's domestic politics.

Since 2024, despite numerous tentative to improve relations between both countries, tensions have increased to an unprecedented level in recent times. These tensions are related to migration issues in France, security and internal politics, historical memory issues utilized by authorities in Algeria, but also recent evolutions of France's diplomatic official position regarding the issue of Western Sahara.

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The Colonial Past and Historical Contentions

The French conquest of Algeria, then a dependency of the Ottoman Empire, commenced in 1830, ostensibly as a response to a diplomatic incident. In reality, the French objective was to assert its dominance over the Western Mediterranean vis a vis the United Kingdom but also to put an end to slave trafficking still active from the coast of Algeria. An incident, where the Dey of Algiers allegedly touched the French consul with a fly whisk, provided a pretext for France, under the reign of Charles X, to initiate military action, leading to the capture of Algiers and the beginning of a protracted colonization process that ultimately and paradoxically established the borders of the contemporary Algerian nation. The conquest was marked by significant resistance from various Algerian tribal leaders, including Emir Abdelkader, who led a sustained guerrilla campaign against French forces until his reddition in 1847.¹ France gradually extended its control over Algerian territory, which did not at that time constitute a nation, including the Sahara in 1902, through a combination of superior technological and military capacities over a weakened entity with lessened legitimacy, and alliances with local leaders opposed to the Dey of Algiers.

By 1848, France had declared Algeria an integral part of its territory, dividing it into three departments: Algiers, Oran, and Constantine following the model of French territorial organization since Napoleon the First. This administrative integration was unique among French colonies, as Algeria was considered an extension of mainland France rather than a separate colonial entity. The settlement of the population from France, particularly the Alsace-Lorraine region integrated into the German Empire after the French defeat of 1870, as

well as other European countries, essentially Spain and Italy, to develop infrastructures and agriculture was encouraged. However, this integration was organized on an unequal status system. Land policies favored European settlers, leading to economic marginalization of local populations. The indigenous Muslim population was subjected to discriminatory administrative laws, such as the Code de l'Indigénat (1875), which guaranteed the local population respect of their traditions, religion, and culture, including at the judicial level, but restricted their political rights and imposed special taxes and forced labor to build infrastructures on the population. The Code de l'Indigénat was abolished in 1944 but the Muslim Algerian populace did not receive an equal status of citizenship. It was only in 1956, after the beginning of the Algeria War of Independence, that all the autochthone population of Algeria received the right to vote.² The distinction established between nationality (French) and full citizenship was maintained until the independence.

Throughout the colonial period, Algerians mounted various forms of resistance against French rule. Notable uprisings include the Mokrani Revolt of 1871, which was one of the largest insurrections against colonial authority, resulting in severe reprisals and executions by French forces. The Sétif and Guelma massacre on 5 May 1945 further exemplified the repression of Algerian aspirations for independence. Following a peaceful protest celebrating the end of World War II, French authorities responded with overwhelming force, killing an undetermined number of Algerians. These incidents intensified nationalist sentiments after the end of the Second World War and set the stage for the subsequent war of independence.

The struggle for independence reached its

1 After 1848, Emir Abdelkader spent 4 years as a prisoner at the Château d'Amboise in France. The issue of the restitution of his saber to Algeria is part of the grievances between the two countries.

2 Emmanuelle Saada, « Et le droit colonial inventa l'indigène », *L'Histoire*, juin 2014.

zenith with the Algerian War (1954–1962), a complex and multifaceted conflict characterized by guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and widespread abuses. The National Liberation Front (FLN) spearheaded the fight against French colonial forces, employing both military and political strategies to garner international support and undermine French resolve. The war witnessed atrocities on both sides, including the use of torture by French military personnel and terror attacks against the local population on the Algerian side. During the Cold War, the conflict was also part of a larger movement for the independence of former colonies, supported by the Soviet Union and communist parties as well as the newly established People’s Republic of China but also the United States of America for both idealistic reasons and realist objectives in a changing global geopolitical landscape.

The conflict culminated in the Evian Accords of 1962, which granted Algeria independence but left enduring scars on the collective memories of both nations. In particular, the issue of official archives that France repatriated in 1961 before the independence is part of an ongoing historical dispute between the two countries. In 2021, to solve these issues, historian Benjamin Stora was asked by the French Presidency to write a report on memory issues concerning colonization and the Algerian war.³ Among the recommendations, the report proposed to institute a committee on “memory and historical truth” with French and Algerian historians as well as improving access to archives by French and Algerian historians with the transfer of some of the archives to Algeria.⁴

Recent Developments – Immigration, Evian agreement, and the Sahara Issue

Post-Independence Migration and the 1968 Agreement

Following independence, Algeria and France maintained complex ties, particularly concerning migration. Up to the end of the 1970s, mass migration from former colonies was part of French industrial policy. The 1968 Franco-Algerian Agreement facilitated the movement of Algerian workers to France, granting them specific rights regarding residence and employment. It also facilitated family reunification. This agreement has been revised since 1968 but is still in place despite increasingly loud voices from French political parties to suppress it.⁵ The agreement was rooted in the historical connections between the two countries and aimed to regulate labor migration in a manner beneficial to both parties. Over the decades, the Algerian community in France grew substantially and constitutes today the largest foreign community in France, including second and third generations of migrants with French and Algerian nationality. However, this presence also became a focal point for debates on immigration, integration, and national identity within France as one of the characteristics of this migration is that the youngest generation seems to be less well-integrated than the precedent ones. This is also among this younger generation that radicalized Islam seems to be the most influential. In recent years, political figures have called for a reevaluation or abrogation of the 1968 agreement, arguing that it provides undue

³ Benjamin Stora, *Les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation et la guerre d’Algérie*, viepublique.fr, 20-01-2021 ; « Histoire et mémoire, perceptions croisées », <https://www.jiia-jic.jp/en/events/2018/01/crossed-perceptions-history-and-memorial-issues-in-europe-and-in-asia.html>, FRS-JIIA symposium, 2018,

⁴ Benjamin Stora, op.cit..

⁵ The consensus however is on further reforms and restrictions. Henri Clavier, “Accord Franco-Algérien de 1968, de quoi parle-t’on ?”, Public Sénat.fr, 07-12-2023.

advantages to Algerian nationals—a stance that has further strained diplomatic relations.⁶

Diplomatic Tensions and the Western Sahara Conflict

Diplomatic relations between France and Algeria have been periodically strained by geopolitical issues, notably the Western Sahara conflict. Algeria's support for the Polisario Front, which seeks independence for Western Sahara, contrasts with France's backing of Morocco's claim over the territory. In July 2024, France officially recognized the legitimacy of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, a move that led Algeria to recall its ambassador from Paris and heightened tensions between the two nations.⁷ In October of the same year, France reasserted its support to Morocco on the issue of Western Sahara.⁸ This development not only exacerbated existing diplomatic frictions but also underscored the divergent regional interests and alliances that complicate Franco-Algerian relations. These tensions have increased also since France forces were forced out of the Sahel region in Africa in 2022, putting an end to its operations against jihadist forces (operation Barkhane 2014-2022) that received some intelligence support from Algeria and the right of overfly of Algerian territory by French military planes.⁹

In retaliation to these tensions, Algeria is increasingly reticent to accept the repatriation of its own citizens after expulsion from France

or under an "OQTF". The number of Algerian citizens under OQTF status in France is approximately 50,000 people.¹⁰ On February 22, 2025, an Algerian citizen under this status committed a terrorist attack in Mulhouse, resulting in one person killed and 7 wounded. After this terrorist attack, a special inter-minister committee was convened by French Prime Minister François Bayrou on February 25, 2025, threatening to revise all agreements with Algeria, including the 1968 agreement if the Algerian authorities refused to accept the return of its citizens after a delay of six weeks.¹¹

In November 2024, in what has been perceived by French authorities as another type of retaliatory measure, writer Boualem Sansal, with French and Algerian citizenship, was arrested in Algeria, accused of being a threat to Algeria security, and has not been released since despite numerous demand by the French authorities.¹²

In the digital age, social media platforms have become arenas for public discourse and influence. Algerian "influencers", both within the country and in the diaspora in France, have utilized these platforms to highlight historical grievances, criticize French policies, and mobilize public opinion. In January 2025, France investigated several Algerian citizens residing in its territory for allegedly promoting hatred and violence on social media against France and opponents of the Algerian government. This incident not only sparked a diplomatic

6 A vote took place in 2023 at the National Assembly with 114 in favor of abolishing the agreement and 151 against it.

7 Orlane Edouard, « Pourquoi le soutien d'Emmanuel Macron au plan du Maroc fait polémique », *BFM TV*, 30-07-2024.

8 « La France réaffirme la souveraineté marocaine sur le Sahara occidental mais l'imbroglio juridique reste intact », *Le Monde*, 30-10-2024.

9 <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20211003-algeria-escalates-france-diplomatic-row-with-flight-ban>

10 Obligation de Quitter le Territoire Français (*Obligation to leave French territory.*)

11 Olivier Becht, « Il faut renvoyer les étrangers sous OQTF dans un autre pays », *Le Figaro*, 27-02-2025.

12 Karim Mezran, « The Roots of Recent Algerian-Franco tensions is deeper than it may seem », Atlantic Council, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-roots-of-recent-algeria-france-tensions-are-deeper-than-it-may-seem/>, 30-01-2025.

row, following the issue of Western Sahara, but also highlighted the complex interplay between freedom of expression, national security, and international relations. The digital landscape thus serves as a mirror and an instrument reflecting the deep-seated tensions between France and Algeria.

The Use of Historical Grievances in Algerian Domestic Politics

Since gaining independence, Algeria's ruling establishment has anchored its legitimacy in the narrative of the anti-colonial struggle. The National Liberation Front (FLN), which imposed its leadership over all other independence movements, positioned itself as the guardian of national sovereignty and identity as the main source of its legitimacy. This claim has been a cornerstone of the political discourse, with the colonial past serving as a unifying theme to foster national cohesion at a time when the regime is facing accusations of corruption and economic incompetency leading to harsh social inequalities. Measures have been adopted including "Arabization" of the education system, banning the use of French language in favor of Arab and English as the international language of choice. Social inequalities and a high level of unemployment are also at the origin of Algeria youth's desire to migrate to France and other European countries, legally or illegally, leading to further identity issues, both in France and in Algeria.

Instrumentalization of Historical Contentions

The Algerian government has frequently leveraged historical grievances against France to address internal challenges. By invoking the colonial past, the regime seeks to divert attention from pressing domestic issues such as economic difficulties, unemployment, and demands for political reform. This is a pattern common to authoritarian non-democratic regimes that rely on stirring nationalist feelings in the population to increase their

fragile legitimacy. This strategy involves emphasizing the sacrifices made during the War of Independence and portraying contemporary challenges as extensions of the colonial struggle. Despite the past of time, more than 60 years after the end of the Algeria war, these issues tend to increase rather than diminish, following the state of internal challenges for the Algerian government. Another common pattern to these issues is the difficulty to definitely solve the tensions as they can be reactivated when considered necessary by the regimes that use historical issues as internal politics and foreign policy assets.

Critics of the authorities often find themselves labeled as unpatriotic or as agents of former colonial powers. By framing dissent in this manner, the regime justifies repressive measures against opposition groups and civil society activists. This approach not only stifles political pluralism but also perpetuates a narrative that conflates loyalty to the state with adherence to the official historical discourse. In more democratic countries, these issues can also be exploited as instruments in partisan confrontations.

Economic Relations Between France and Algeria and the issue of sanctions

Surprisingly, despite these ongoing tensions, economic ties between France and Algeria are still significant, with bilateral trade reaching €11.1 billion in 2024, marking a slight 4,3% decrease from the previous year. Algeria remains France's second export market on the African continent after Morocco. This growth was primarily driven by a rise in French imports of Algerian hydrocarbons, including liquefied natural gas and crude oil, in the context of the Ukraine war and the end of Russian LNG imports. French exports to Algeria experienced an increase of 6,6% to €4.8 billion. France stands as Algeria's second-largest supplier and third-largest customer. Key French exports to Algeria encompass industrial products (39,8% of the

total), mechanical equipment, transportation materials, and agri-food products. Conversely, Algeria's exports to France are predominantly hydrocarbons, which constitute a significant portion of French imports from Algeria (79,4%).¹³

France is still a major investor in Algeria, particularly outside the hydrocarbon sector. In 2023, French foreign direct investment (FDI) stock in Algeria amounted to €2.8 billion, positioning France as the third-largest investor after the United States and Italy.¹⁴ These investments are mainly concentrated in financial and insurance activities, manufacturing industries (notably automotive, pharmaceuticals, food, and chemicals), and extractive industries. French companies play a crucial role in the Algerian economy, with approximately 201 subsidiaries recorded in 2021. This figure underestimates the actual presence, as it excludes representative offices, branches, and minority holdings. The sectors in which these companies operate are diverse, including transportation, automotive, agri-food, banking, insurance, and pharmaceuticals.¹⁵

Despite these economic ties, recent diplomatic tensions have cast a shadow over France-Algeria trade relations. In July 2024, France's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara led to a diplomatic crisis with Algeria. In response, Algeria recalled its ambassador from Paris, and rumors emerged about a potential suspension of trade relations with France.¹⁶ Although the Algerian government denied these claims, uncertainties linger regarding the future of economic exchanges between the two countries. For France, particularly since the Ukraine war, imports of Algerian LNG are significant but the vulnerability also threatens Algeria, particularly if the transfer of money

from the Algerian community that lives in France is limited. These tensions highlight the fragility of Franco-Algerian economic relations in the face of political fluctuations. Nevertheless, the economic interdependence suggests that both nations, and not France only have a vested interest in maintaining their economic cooperation. However, this economic cooperation is not sufficient to abate ideological and diplomatic tensions between the two countries. Also, in Asia, China's economic dependency on access to foreign markets and investments does not preclude its exploitation of historical and territorial issues to threaten its trade and investment interests with neighboring countries like Japan or South Korea.

Conclusion

The relationship between France and Algeria illustrates how historical and territorial disputes are often employed by authoritarian or fragile regimes or political parties as tools to increase their influence, consolidate power, or divert attention from internal problems. In Algeria, the regime regularly invokes the colonial past to legitimize its authority, suppress dissent, and bolster nationalist sentiment. This instrumentalization of history hinders the development of a dynamic civil society and an open democratic debate.

It is essential to recognize that while historical and territorial issues can be sources of tension, their persistence and intensification are often the result of deliberate political strategies. To move towards genuine reconciliation and mutually beneficial cooperation, it is crucial for both nations to adopt an honest and critical approach to their shared past while committing to resolving current disputes through dialogue and mutual respect. Ultimately, overcoming the

13 "Relations économiques bilatérales - ALGÉRIE." *Direction générale du Trésor*, 27-02-2025.

14 In 2023, China's FDI stock in Algeria amounted to 1, 6 billion Euros.

15 "Les relations économiques." *Ambassade de France en Algérie*, 10-04-2024.

16 "Algeria denies having imposed sanctions on France.", *Le monde*, 08-11-2024.

instrumentalization of the past requires political will on both sides of the Mediterranean, as well as active engagement from the authorities in formerly colonized powers, to build a future based on understanding and cooperation.