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Algeria and France: Back to the Future?

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Current diplomatic tension between Algeria and France is adding a new chapter to a historically fraught relationship. This recent rift erupted last summer, following France's decision to endorse Morocco's position on the future of the Western Sahara region, in which the territory would be incorporated into the kingdom. In so doing, France effectively abandoned the Algerian-supported quest to establish an independent state there, a central pivot of Algerian diplomacy since that conflict began in 1975. For Algeria, this was another diplomatic setback, coming from a player commanding an important role in North African politics. Algeria's swift responses to the French decision, starting with the recall of its ambassador to Paris, have angered France, further eroding bilateral relations. Beneath the surface of this crisis, however, are echoes of the past that continue to influence Algerian-French relations. These include the legacy of France's 132-year repressive colonial rule over Algeria, the violent Algerian war of independence that ended in 1962, and Algeria's post-colonial efforts to secure its national identity and regional standing. While the outcome of the current crisis remains to be seen, these deeper fissures will continue to overshadow relations. Addressing them may be the only way to build a new relationship between the two countries, which would discard past grievances and construct a forward-looking partnership. However, the prospects for this happening in both countries remain unlikely, for reasons to be discussed in this paper.

The current crisis between Algeria and France erupted in the context of already strained relations, where recurring crises have become the norm.¹ In October 2021, Algerian leaders were angered by reports that French president Emmanuel Macron questioned whether Algeria had existed as a nation before French colonialism, a familiar colonial-era trope used to sow doubts about Algeria's right to

¹ Khaled Abou Zahir, "[Has the Balance of Power Shifted in France-Algeria Ties?](#)," *Arab News*, September 24, 2024.

self-determination.² These comments from Macron were surprising, given previous statements in 2017, prior to his election, in which he described French actions in the Algerian war of independence as a “crime against humanity.”³ As the first French president born after the colonial period, Macron appeared willing to recalibrate relations with Algeria and promote reconciliation after he took office.

But after taking office, Macron was far less inclined to chart a new course with Algeria, presumably concerned that the French public would oppose it. In those 2021 comments Macron also criticized the Algerian “political military system” for promoting a history of “hatred towards France” to justify its existence.⁴ France at the time also decided to severely reduce the number of entry visas to Algerian citizens (and other North Africans), claiming that Algeria (and others) were obstructing the repatriation of nationals illegally residing in France.⁵

This further increased Algerian ire. In response to Macron’s comments, Algeria accused France of “genocide” during the colonial era, recalled its ambassador to France, and banned French military planes from its airspace. Algerian president Abdelmajid Tebboune conditioned the ambassador’s return on “total respect for the Algerian state,” and accused France of meddling in its internal affairs.⁶ A state visit by the French president to Algiers in August 2022 helped clear the air between the two countries, with France interested in expanding Algerian energy exports in order to reduce European reliance on Russian oil and gas after the war in Ukraine began. Accordingly, Macron’s visit focused on future economic cooperation, while Algerian leaders continued to press for greater French acknowledgement and contrition for its colonial past.⁷ Macron made several symbolic gestures during that visit, including laying a wreath at a monument to Algerians killed in the war, and announcing the establishment of a joint French-Algerian commission of historians to study archives of the colonial era.⁸ The French president, however, stopped short of making a formal apology for France’s colonial rule in Algeria.⁹

Algeria’s continued focus on the colonial past is not surprising, considering the heavy suffering it endured throughout that period. Moreover, Algeria’s aging leadership (including its 79-year-old

² [“Algeria Recalls Envoy to France After ‘Inadmissible Interference’,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, October 3, 2021.

³ [“France’s Macron Seeks Ties with Algeria Beyond ‘Painful’ History,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, August 25, 2022.

⁴ Akram Belkaid, [“France and Algeria: A Long History of Distrust,”](#) *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 10, 2021; [“France’s Macron in Algeria: Frosty Ties, Bitter History,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, August 25, 2022.

⁵ [“France’s Macron in Algeria: Frosty Ties, Bitter History,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, August 25, 2022.

⁶ [“France’s Macron in Algeria: Frosty Ties, Bitter History,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, August 25, 2022; Hugh Schofield, [“France’s Emmanuel Macron to Mend Algeria Ties as Energy Crisis Bites,”](#) *BBC*, August 25, 2022.

⁷ Hugh Schofield, [“France’s Emmanuel Macron to Mend Algeria Ties as Energy Crisis Bites,”](#) *BBC*, August 25, 2022; [“France’s Macron Seeks Ties with Algeria Beyond ‘Painful’ History,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, August 25, 2022.

⁸ [“France’s Macron Seeks Ties with Algeria Beyond ‘Painful’ History,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, August 25, 2022.

⁹ [“Macron Rules Out Official Apology for Colonial Abuses in Algeria,”](#) *Al Jazeera*, January 21, 2021.

president)¹⁰ is still personally linked to that era and bears its scars. But the heavy emphasis on the colonial era is also a pillar of an Algerian regime that lacks a cohesive vision for the country's future and prefers to resort to the past as a way of securing its legitimacy.¹¹ The emerging young Algerian generation, increasingly impatient with the government's inability to address social and economic challenges, is less interested in the regime's focus on the past. It seeks more immediate remedies to pressing problems, and is frustrated with the country's aging, military-backed leadership's ineptness. Moreover, the Algerian government has also faced diplomatic setbacks in regional African politics,¹² further tarnishing its domestic image.

On the French side, particularly on the far-right, many oppose the idea of repentance for the country's rule over Algeria. In 2005, the French National Assembly passed a law glorifying French colonialism, indicating that it had no intention of reconsidering aspects of the country's past. These opinions are further fueled by rising French opposition to immigration (from Algeria and other Muslim-majority North African countries), and the growing popularity of far-right political parties among French voters.¹³ There is little interest across the French political spectrum right now in making any symbolic concessions to Algeria, which would only add to the current domestic woes in France.¹⁴ The French president's statement in 2021, which asserted there would be "no repentance nor apologies" for French rule over Algeria, remains unchanged.¹⁵

This was the clouded context in which the recent diplomatic strife broke out in late July 2024. France's decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara as the "sole base" for the region's present and future signaled a shift in French policy, which until then embraced a cautious approach of "delicate rapprochement" to the conflict between Algeria and Morocco over the region. France chose to follow the United States and Spain, and endorse Morocco's position. This was partially a result of Moroccan pressure on Paris, along with a growing recognition of Morocco's growing involvement in North and Sub-Saharan politics and a French interest in maintaining its influence on the African continent.¹⁶ For Algeria, this was a stinging, unforgivable act of betrayal:

¹⁰ Prime Minister Nadir Larbaoui (75) and much of the Algeria's opaque ruling elite. See: Saber Bliidi, "[Time For Algeria's Aged Elite to Pass the Torch](#)," *Arab Weekly*, July 24, 2024.

¹¹ Geoff D. Porter, "Algeria's Foreign Policy Pillars," *NARCO Analysis*, June 26, 2023.

¹² Algeria has experienced eroding influence in the Sahel and in the African Union. See "[Managing Tensions Between Algeria and Morocco](#)," *International Crisis Group* No. 247, November 29, 2024; Riccardo Fabiani, "[Algeria and Morocco in Africa: Between Normal Competition and Diplomatic Escalation](#)," *European Institute of the Mediterranean Yearbook*, 2023.

¹³ "[France's Macron in Algeria: Frosty Ties, Bitter History](#)," *Al Jazeera*, August 25, 2022.

¹⁴ David Broder, "[France is in Deep, Deep Hole](#)," *The New York Times*, February 11, 2025; Basma El-Atti, "[What Post-Independence Deals with Algeria is France Scrapping as 'Revenge'?](#)," *The New Arab*, January 16, 2025.

¹⁵ "[Macron Rules Out Official Apology for Colonial Abuses in Algeria](#)," *Al Jazeera*, January 21, 2021.

¹⁶ Sarah Zaaïmi, "[France Has Sided with Morocco on the Western Sahara. How Might Algeria Respond?](#)," *The Atlantic Council*, August 1, 2024.

“It’s over. A rupture,” Algerian officials reportedly reacted to the news.¹⁷ Algeria recalled its ambassador from Paris, and president Tebboune planned visit to France was cancelled.¹⁸ French president Macron’s visit to Morocco in October 2024, unleashed a torrent of Algerian criticism of France violating international laws and generating regional tensions by endorsing Moroccan interests.¹⁹

In recent months, relations between Paris and Algiers have further escalated, taking a “worrying turn” according to the French daily *Le Monde*.²⁰ The November 2024 arrest of French-Algerian writer Boualem Sansal, an outspoken critic of the Algerian government upon his return to Algiers has been sharply criticized by French officials.²¹ Algeria refused to admit one of its nationals deported from France in early January on charges of inciting violence in online social media platforms, leading French interior minister Bruno Retailleau to accuse Algeria of “trying to humiliate France.”²² He added that France would maintain its composure, while assessing “all the means at our disposal regarding Algeria.”²³ Indeed, a noteworthy aspect of the current Algerian-French crisis is the strident tone French officials have adopted in their comments about Algeria, suggesting that Paris has lost its patience with Algeria’s increasingly hostility to France. It also reflects the right-wing’s rising political sway in French politics. Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot suggested in an interview last month that he expected bilateral relations to deteriorate even further, as Algeria did not seem committed to improving relations.²⁴ For its part, Algeria has denied any attempt to escalate tensions with France, despite a “vindictive” and “hateful disinformation campaign” led by “the French far-right.”²⁵ These statements suggest that Algiers may seek to cool the flaring tempers and stabilize the situation.

How this current crisis will subside remains to be seen. Some Algerian officials have warned that more misunderstandings and tension could lead to an irrevocable rupture between Algeria and

¹⁷ Basma El-Atti, [“What Post-Independence Deals with Algeria is France Scrapping as ‘Revenge’?”](#), *The New Arab*, January 16, 2025.

¹⁸ Basma El-Atti, [“What Post-Independence Deals with Algeria is France Scrapping as ‘Revenge’?”](#), *The New Arab*, January 16, 2025; Rina Bassist, [“Relations Between France, Algeria, Grow Cooler Over Morocco Ties,”](#) *Al Monitor*, November 17, 2024.

¹⁹ Rina Bassist, [“Relations Between France, Algeria, Grow Cooler Over Morocco Ties,”](#) *Al Monitor*, November 17, 2024.

²⁰ [“Remaining Firm and Calm Toward Algeria,”](#) *Le Monde*, January 14, 2025.

²¹ Sansal was returning from France, previously expressing doubts about Algeria’s ties to the Western Sahara region and siding with Morocco’s position regarding the disputed territory. Sansal has a history of ruffling feathers in Algeria, such as his visit to Israel in 2014. See: [“Algeria Holds French Algerian Writer Boualem Sansal on National Security Challenges,”](#) *France24*, November 26, 2024; Ephrat Livni, [“French Intellectuals Decry a Dissident’s Arrest in Algeria,”](#) *The New York Times*, November 27, 2024.

²² [“Paris Accuses Algeria of Trying to Humiliate France by Refusing to Admit a Deported Influencer,”](#) *Associated Press*, January 10, 2025.

²³ [“Algeria Denies Escalation Intention Amid Diplomatic Row with France,”](#) *Xinhua*, January 12, 2025.

²⁴ Issam Toutate, [“French FM Says France-Algeria Relations in Serious Decline,”](#) *Morocco World News*, January 6, 2025.

²⁵ [“Algeria Denies Escalation Intention Amid Diplomatic Row with France,”](#) *Xinhua*, January 12, 2025.

France.²⁶ But what is more evident than ever in the current crisis is the lack of a genuine, significant reconciliation process between the former colonizer and colonized societies. This is a subtle hurdle obstructing any potential advancement. More than fifty years after France's withdrawal from Algeria, France remains unwilling to engage in a critical review of its role there, and its attitude towards the nearly 1 million Algerian Muslim immigrants to France. Algeria is also yet to offer a substantial model for the type of relations it would like to have with France.²⁷ Unfortunately, the current political climate in both countries offers little hope for such a process to begin. In that sense, historians familiar with Algerian history can sadly conclude that little has changed in the composition of Algerian-French relations.

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²⁶ Akram Belkaid, "[France and Algeria: A Long History of Distrust](#)," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 10, 2021.

²⁷ Karim Merzan and Nicole Pedde, "[The Roots of Recent Algeria-France Tensions Are Deeper Than It May Seem](#)," *The Atlantic Council*, January 30, 2025.