

Language Imperialism in French Algeria

Middle East/North Africa

Adam Mikhail

Abstract: As the post World War II period saw the rapid dismantling of Europe's colonial empires, few nations clung to their overseas territories with as much zeal as France. Immediately off the heels of its failure to maintain control in Indochina, and facing national shame and embarrassment for military shortcomings there, France launched into a second full-scale war to hold one of its most valued colonies, Algeria. A French territory for over 100 years, Algeria faced unparalleled efforts to alter its society and subject its people to French rule. Attempting to subvert the existing culture in Algeria, the French saw language as a primary target in the battle for cultural dominance. Systematic efforts were made by French authorities to restrict and limit indigenous tongues, such as Arabic and Berber, and impose the French language as a

means to subvert and supplant existing Algerian culture with that of metropolitan France. An examination of Algeria's colonial history, its special status within the greater French imperial system, French attitudes regarding their society and culture, as well as the perspectives of Algerian's opposed to French rule, provides a greater context that can simply be described as a policy of cultural domination.

As the post World War II period saw the rapid dismantling of Europe's colonial empires, few nations clung to their overseas territories with as much zeal as France. Immediately off the heels of its failure to maintain control in Indochina, and facing national shame and embarrassment for military shortcomings there, France launched into a second full-scale war to hold one of its most valued colonies, Algeria. A French territory for over 100 years, Algeria faced unparalleled efforts to alter its society and subject its people to French rule. Attempting to subvert the existing culture in Algeria, the French saw language as a primary target in the battle for cultural dominance. Systematic efforts were made by French authorities to restrict and limit indigenous tongues, such as Arabic and Berber, and impose the French language as a means to subvert and supplant existing Algerian culture with that of metropolitan France. An examination of Algeria's colonial history, its special status

within the greater French imperial system, French attitudes regarding their society and culture, as well as the perspectives of Algerians opposed to French rule, provides a greater context that can simply be described as a policy of cultural domination.

Though separated only by the Mediterranean Sea, France did not establish a colonial presence in Algeria until 1830. Following the Napoleonic invasion of nearby Egypt, an increased reliance on Algerian grain and the resulting debt created tension between the governments of France and Algeria. A relatively innocuous event, the "fly-swat incident", in which Hussein Dey, the regent of Algiers, struck French consul Pierre Deval, caused this diplomatic stress to erupt. Used by the French as a pretense for invasion, they quickly seized the city and later the surrounding countryside. While nominally a part of the Ottoman Empire, Algeria functioned largely autonomously and, lacking proper military support, the

remainder of its major cities and regions fell to French occupation.¹ The relationship of occupier and occupied would soon evolve into that of colonizer and colonized. As this conquest developed, so too did rhetoric around the innate cultural differences between the French and Algerians, drawing a divide between Muslim and Christian. A poem by resistance leader and Islamic scholar, Abdelkader al-Djezairi, laments the taking of Algiers asking, “If the mother of the cities is taken, what will you have left, Oh Muslim?”² Another poem by an unnamed student in the city at the time of the invasion declares,

“So much does that cursed one breathe to plague us! The Christians have installed themselves in the city; its appearance has changed... They have named that Qaisariya *the Square*, where the Books and their binders were formerly found. The

Magnificent Mosque which was next to it has been destroyed by them simply in order to spite the Muslims.”³

The supposed incompatibility of Islam and Christianity underlies efforts made by the French to impress their culture and value system on Algerians. Consequently, language arises as the means through which that culture is imposed.

In order to discuss French determination to bring its culture to Algeria, it is necessary to examine French self and national identity. Arising from a tradition dictating that the ideal society is formed based upon the model of western powers, Europeans of the 19th century saw their civilization as the premier example. Within Europe, France viewed itself as the ultimate culture, citing the ideals of *Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite* forged in the turbulent years of the

¹ James Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 93.

² Julia Ann Clancy-Smith and Charles D. Smith, *The Modern Middle East and North Africa: A History in*

Documents (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 31.

³ Alf Andrew Heggoy, *The French Conquest of Algiers: 1830, An Oral Tradition* (Athens: Center for International Studies, 1986) 32-36.

French Revolution. This sense of French exceptionalism precluded a civilizing mission and a necessity to spread these values throughout France's imperial holdings.⁴ Among the French colonies, Algeria held a special position. Rather than simply maintained as an overseas territory following its conquest, Algeria was organized into three *departments*, as was the system on the mainland. In this way, Algeria was not simply another colony but rather a full part of France herself.⁵ Given the importance of French republican values as part of the national identity, cultural assimilation became a priority for the colonial authority. The fourth governor of Algeria from 1831 to 1833, Anne Jean Marie Rene Savary, highlighted language as one of the most important factors not only of assimilation but also the general maintenance of power stating, "I regard the promotion of education

and our language as the most effective means of making progress towards our domination in this country."⁶

The imposition of French over Arabic in colonial Algeria acted to bolster the values and culture of metropolitan France while simultaneously undermining the existing and (as the French viewed it) opposing culture of Islam. As the language vector through which Islam and its surrounding culture are supported and propagated, classical (or literary) Arabic was the prime target of the French colonial authority. Though not commonly spoken, this formal variety of the language was typically taught in schools. Recognizing this, efforts were made by the state to reform the education system in Algeria. Speaking on these changes, Alfred Rambaud, Minister of Public Education in 1897 explained,

⁴ Mohamed Benrabah, *Language Conflict in Algeria: From Colonialism to Post-Independence* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2013), 25.

⁵ Gelvin, 93.

⁶ Mohamed Benrabah, *Langue et pouvoir en Algerie: Histoire d'un traumatisme linguistique* (Paris: Atlantica-Seguiet, 1999), 44.

“This should ensure the predominance of our language over the various local idioms, inculcate in the Muslims our own idea of what France is and of its role in the world, and replace ignorance and fanatical prejudices by the simple but precise notions of European science.”⁷

Among educators and writers, the importance of religion, language, and education was made clear. Jean Dejeux, a Catholic missionary and writer in Algeria, studied the literary output of Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians writing in French. Discussing the impact of the French language on an Islamic society he argues, “The foreign language had been introduced as an exciting *fitna* [temptation or sedition in Islam].”⁸ Dejeux sees French as a way to separate Algerians from their Muslim identity.

As Algerians began to demand the rights to self-determination, self-governance, and eventually complete independence from

France, the matter of language and Muslim identity remained major points in the literature of revolutionaries. Ahmed ben Messali Hadj, an Algerian nationalist and Marxist, formed several political parties whose platforms called for independence from France. Following the French centenary celebration of the conquest of Algiers, he published a two-part manifesto demanding Algerian independence. In its second segment, he lays forth the requirements for a new government: “Revolutionary national government: 1. A constitutional assembly elected through universal suffrage; 2. Universal suffrage at all levels and the eligibility of Algerians for all assemblies; 3. The Arabic language shall be considered an official language.”⁹ As Algeria’s fight for independence developed into an organized war, the *Front de Liberation Nationale* (FLN) acted as the face and voice of the

⁷ Fanny Colonna, *Instituteurs algeriens* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1975), 75.

⁸ Jean Dejeux, *La litterature maghrebine d’expression francaise* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992), 4.

⁹ Clancy-Smith, 178-179.

revolution. In its declaration calling for the removal of the colonial regime and a final revolution for Algerian independence, the FLN highlighted Islam as a base upon which Algerian society would be built:

“GOAL: National independence through: 1. The restoration of the Algerian state, sovereign, democratic, and social, within the framework of the principles of Islam; 2. The preservation of fundamental freedoms, without distinction of race or religion.”¹⁰

As Algeria finally gained independence in March of 1962, the French government acknowledged the importance of language and religious identity as crucial elements of Algerian culture that had been suppressed. In the first emergency session held after the announcement of Algerian independence, Prime Minister Michel Debre addressed the National Assembly stating,

“Their freedoms are guaranteed, property rights respected, their

cultural, linguistic, and religious particularities guaranteed. Their fair representation in the institutions responsible for public affairs, whether in the administration or elected assemblies, will be enshrined in law.”¹¹

Along with freedom of governance and political enfranchisement, linguistic freedom was also acknowledged and as France exited Algeria, so too did efforts at Arabic suppression and the imposition of French.

Surveying the colonial history of Algeria, from the French conquest of 1830, through the 19th century, and up to its independence, the French made attempts to supplant the Arabic language. Commonly used among the indigenous population, Arabic was targeted by colonial authorities aiming to install French as the primary language. An attitude of exceptionalism permeated French culture and necessitated that the values of metropolitan France be

¹⁰ Clancy-Smith, 216.

¹¹ Rene Masson, “Session extraordinaire de 1961-1962, compte rendu integral, 20 mars 1962” (Debats de l’assemblee nationale, Paris, 1962), 554.

transplanted to its colonies. As the special case amongst French colonial holdings, Algeria was the primary target of the assimilationist mission. Arabic functioned not only as a language but as a common link between all Muslims. For this reason, as well as the supposed lack of compatibility

between the cultures and religions of France and Algeria, Arabic was marked for erasure. Only after gaining independence through violent revolution was Algeria able to “speak freely” in Arabic, Berber, or any local tongue.

References

- Benrabah, Mohamed. *Language Conflict in Algeria: From Colonialism to Post-Independence*. Bristol, United Kingdom: Multilingual Matters, 2013.
- Benrabah, Mohamed. *Langue et pouvoir en Algerie: Histoire d'un traumatisme linguistique*. Paris, France: Atlantica-Seguiet, 1999.
- Clancy-Smith, Julia Ann and Charles D. Smith. *The Modern Middle East and North Africa: A History in Documents*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Colonna, Fanny. *Instituteurs algeriens*. Paris, France: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1975.
- Dejeux, Jean. *La litterature maghebine d'expression francaise*. Paris, France: Presses universitaires de France, 1992.
- Gelvin, James L. *The Modern Middle East: A History*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Heggoy, Alf Andrew. *The French Conquest of Algiers: 1830, An Oral Tradition*. Athens, Ohio: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1986.
- Masson, Rene. "Session extraordinaire de 1961-1962, compte rendu integral, 20 mars 1962." *Debats de l'assemblee nationale*, Paris, France, 1962.