



# Algeria: Nonviolent resistance against French colonialism, 1830s-1950s

Malika Rahal

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**Algeria:**  
**Nonviolent resistance against French colonialism,**  
**1830s-1950s**

Dr. Malika Rahal

IHTP-CNRS

**Author's version**  
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## **Preeminent place of violent resistance in Algeria's modern history and politics**

In recent years, two important books have focused on the violence of the French conquest and colonization of Algeria, beginning in 1830. Le Cour Grandmaison's *Coloniser, Exterminer*<sup>1</sup> emphasizes the role colonies such as Algeria played in the development of military forms of violence later imported to Europe, while Brower<sup>2</sup> gives a fine description of the violent means used by the French army to control the Algerian desert after the conquest. In doing so, both authors go beyond the well-known episodes of Algerian armed resistance--notably the armed resistance of Amir Abd-al-Qadir in the 1830s and '40s, and the War for Independence (1954-1962)--to re-emphasize the duration and intensity of violence in the resistance against French colonial occupation of Algeria. However, such discourse leaves little, if any, narrative space for uncovering the existence and discussing the role of other, nonviolent, forms of struggle developed by Algerians against the French colonial occupation.

In Algeria after independence, figures such as Amir Abd-al-Qadir, Bachagha El-Moqrani (leader of the 1871 uprising), or Sheikh Bouamama (a leader of 1881-1908 insurrection) were celebrated in *lieux de mémoire*<sup>3</sup>--naming streets and squares after them or erecting their statutes. The most ubiquitous faces of the nationalist struggle in Algeria have undoubtedly been *shuhada* (martyrs) who gave their lives in the war for independence. Their constant commemoration occupies a large portion of public space, and they are regularly recalled in official speeches and ceremonies. August 20 was chosen as Martyr Day, marking the violent uprising in the Constantine region in 1955. It was one of the main roles of the former *Mujahidin* (veterans) ministry to publish and broadcast narratives of individual combatants. Booklets, press articles or popular films glorified armed struggle, and sacralized the martyrs' sacrifice. Ceramic tiles representing figures of martyrs were used to decorate the city of Algiers, and Algeria is in fact known as *blad milyun shahid*, the million-martyr country.<sup>4</sup> In 1988, a national monument was constructed in commemoration of their sacrifice: the *Maqam Shahid*, visible from all sides of the bay, has two statues at its foot. One represents the National Liberation Army soldier bearing his weapon, while the other is an armed peasant--both symbols of a nation united in arms. Lastly, in their preambles, the Algerian constitutions of 1963, 1976, and 1987 emphasized the leading role of the National Liberation Front and the National Liberation Army (FLN-ALN) in winning independence, presented violent resistance as the ultimate liberation tool, and glorified the memory of *shuhada* and the dignity of *mujahidin*.

When the *Front de Libération nationale* (FLN) came to power after the War for Independence, their reinterpretation of past events produced an official history of the liberation struggle - a history that was univocal and linear.<sup>5</sup> It was a linear narrative because it claimed that nationalism had been conveyed through a single ideological thread--a political genealogy that linked FLN with the *Étoile Nord-Africaine* created in 1926 amongst the Algerian workers in Paris, the *Parti du peuple algérien* (PPA) established in 1937, and the *Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés démocratiques* (MTLD) set up in 1946. The FLN was an ultimate and quintessential avatar of all these political parties. Consequently, all other political organizations were considered illegitimate, and their contributions to a national struggle denied. It was also a univocal narrative because it defined “Algerianness” as Arabic in language and Muslim in religion, thus symbolically--and to some extent practically--excluding other languages (French or Berber) and religions (Christian or Jewish). Furthermore, the collective subsumed the individual to fit FLN populist ideology: as there had been “but one hero, the people,” individual glorification was only accepted for martyrs.<sup>6</sup> As a result, until recent years, personal accounts in the form of autobiographies, biographies, and memoirs were a genre absent from modern Algerian history.

The constraints set by official history not only influenced public commemorations and vernacular narratives, but also affected the writing of academic history in Algeria and also in France, where much of the Algerian history was being written. Benjamin Stora’s biography of Messali Hadj, leader of

the MNA (Mouvement national Algerian, a rival organization to the FLN) in 1986<sup>7</sup>, was undoubtedly a subversive endeavor both in form and topic, bringing to the foreground a figure rejected from official history, and showing how, at every turn, Messali was faced with decisions concerning tactical choices that were more complex and nuanced than a simplistic divide between legal action versus armed struggle. After the censorship loosened in 2000s, a few autobiographical narratives were published.<sup>8</sup> These sources are fundamental for describing and accounting for certain forms of collective resistance, in particular more informal types of defiance. For example, they reveal ties between the workings of cultural associations, trade unions and political parties. Childhood stories emphasize the importance of the scouting movement as a means of resistance. Autobiographies uncover how people confronted colonization on a more intimate, individual and family level rather than the more organized level of political parties.

Classically in post-colonial states, victorious armed movements created national narratives that often help them stay in power and shape the nation. In Algeria, after 1962, official history presented revolutionary violent methods and guerrilla warfare as the only possible means by which independence could have been achieved. This narrative was institutionalized in Algerian academia during the 1970s while state monopoly over book publication, including history textbooks, left no outlet for competing narratives.

As a result, the use of nonviolent forms of resistance such as formation and work of cultural associations or political nonviolent organizing in particular during the “decade of political parties” after the Second World War<sup>9</sup>, appeared as nothing more than “dilatoriness and pointless discussion”, in the words of the historian and former activist Mohammed Harbi<sup>10</sup>, and they have been accepted as such even by those who actively participated and led them. Such attitudes led to a loss of collective memory of the nonviolent forms of action while, in reality, cultural associations, unions, as well as *sufi* and family networks--largely tacitly and nonviolently—had resisted, and later openly challenged colonization.

## **French colonial occupation of Algeria**

The French colonial project in Algeria involved a complex subjugation strategy, and its severity and intensity conditioned how the indigenous people could resist it. The territorial conquest in 1830 was followed by military occupation that lasted until 1871. As a consequence of the imposition of a new colonial regime after the defeat of Abd-al-Qadir, the power of the warrior aristocratic class--the *jawad*--was gradually reduced, and the tribal system that had organized society in Algeria disintegrated. Just as significant as the defeat of military insurrections of Mohamed El-Moqrani (1871-72) and Sheikh Bouamama (1881-1908) was the deculturalization of this Bedouin society.<sup>11</sup> The cultural consequences were drastic. In the first 20 years of the occupation, the number of indigenous schools was cut by half.<sup>12</sup> In 1914, only one indigenous child out of 20 had access to French education<sup>13</sup>, and by the end of the colonial period, French universities were

producing only a few dozen graduates from the colonized population annually, most of whom were illiterate in Arabic. Classical Arabic language was in fact one of the first victims of colonization: under colonial rule, there was no equivalent to the universities of the Qarawiyyin in Fes (Morocco) or the Zaytuna in Tunis. The establishment of schools with Arabic as a language of instruction was subject to various types of bureaucratic hurdles and permissions that, *de facto*, made it impossible.

Algeria was also a settler colony to which many French and other Europeans migrated. In 1860, 200 000 Europeans were living in Algeria and owned 340 000 hectares of land (rising to more than 1.2 million hectares by 1881).<sup>14</sup> Forms of dispossession ranged from direct land purchase (of dubious legality) to expropriation, and land-confiscation as a form of collective punishment. Uprooting large portions of the population had long-term consequences for pastoral and farming families who were driven into poverty and forced to migrate.<sup>15</sup> In a country where over 90 percent of the population had been rural, the disruption was considerable. This traumatic and forceful transformation branded the memory of the conquest for the decades to come.

Lastly, after 1848, Algeria was legally no longer a colony but an extension of the French Republic, yet a region of France where the local population was at first excluded from French citizenship and never gained full citizenship rights. Until 1945, the indigenous population elected no representatives and the *code de*

*l'indigénat* (indigenous law) established in 1874 created a number of offences applicable solely to Algerians, limiting their constitutional freedoms.<sup>16</sup>

However, even at the peak of French colonial domination, the colonized society never ceased to resist. Between the nineteenth century episodic outbursts of armed resistance and the armed revolution that began in 1954, nonviolent forms of enduring and resisting conquest and colonization were developed. During the long era of colonization, they evolved from an organic reaction to protect the collective fabric of Algerian indigenous society, to the demand for full citizenship and sovereignty of the people.

## **Resistance to the conquest of the land and against the imposition of a new authority**

### ***Mass emigration as a form of collective resistance***

One of the forms of nonviolent resistance that most troubled the French authorities in the first years of the conquest was Algerians' emigration. Early emigrations were forced by the invasion and subsequent pacification, as well as by the repression that followed every uprising. However, as early as 1830, emigration also appears to be a form of resistance to the imposition of non-Muslim authority, according to the Muslim practice of *hijra*. According to demographer Kamel Kateb<sup>17</sup>, Algerians were leaving the country mainly for Morocco, Tunisia, Syria, Palestine or Egypt, and to a lesser extent for other Muslim countries.



The French found these waves of emigrations troublesome, and eventually took measures against them. Although emigration benefited European settlers by freeing land, it also posed problems: mass exodus had a clear political meaning that embarrassed the authorities. Further costs for the French were that the departure of tribes contributed to the breakdown of public order in Algeria and the increase of banditry, while the emerging French economy in Algeria was hindered by the loss of labor force.

Generally, these migrations were visible actions pursued by large groups of families from the same city or region, convinced of the necessity to leave in reaction to the new colonial conditions. These people were fleeing the rule of a non-Muslim government, confiscation of their lands, and later military conscription. Emigration, they hoped, would preserve their cultural and social identities endangered by the French conquest. While the early emigration waves are impossible to measure, the later ones show the breadth of the phenomenon. The last mass emigration was the departure for Syria of 508 families of the city of Tlemcen in 1910-11 in reaction to the threat of conscription to the French army.

The scale of the emigration movement reveals the profoundness of social disruption in and after 1830. "1830 was an end of the world", wrote James McDougall, referring to the domestic consequences of the conquest.<sup>18</sup> Seeing mass emigration as defiance of the colonial power, the French authorities carried

out surveys to analyze them and tried to block them by refusing the necessary permissions. That, however, did not stop many families from leaving the country illegally. The authorities also threatened tribes with confiscation of their lands, thus foreclosing the possibility of their return or of benefiting from what wealth they possessed.<sup>19</sup> The issue was also diplomatically sensitive, as it created tensions with the countries of destination. In some cases the migrant families refused registration at the French consulate and rapidly blended with the local population. In other cases however, local authorities sought French assistance in managing these large numbers of newly-arrived migrants. Furthermore, as Kateb points out, this nonviolent action threatened French-imposed security in Algeria as hostile Algerian populations began concentrating on the Moroccan and Tunisian borders at a time when these countries were not yet French protectorates.

### ***Rejection and Boycotts***

In the first decades of colonization, notably under the rule of Napoleon III and with the “civilizing mission” gaining popularity among many officers of the *Bureaux arabes*<sup>20</sup> (colonial offices for collecting and analyzing information on colonized population, and responsible for designing a policy toward the indigenous population), the mission of “enlightening” and re-educating indigenous population became central to several projects. Daniel Rivet describes efforts to settle down nomadic populations, or to create new villages designed by French architects on a western model.<sup>21</sup> Despite equipping them with *hammams*

(bath houses) and mosques, the failure of these settlements was resounding as, for example, women rejected them and refused to stay in these new places. The authorities also faced local refusal to adopt medical services provided by the army. While infirmaries were installed among certain tribes, it appears that the people never subscribed to the preventive forms of medicine that were on offer, limiting their attendance to times of crisis and the need for curative medicine.

Western education also encountered quiet noncooperation. The rare Franco-Arab schools created among tribes met no success. One Arab Bureau head explained, “the indigenous people consider that sending their children to school is the most burdensome duty that we impose upon them.”<sup>22</sup> The imperial college in Algiers stagnated while two schools, opened for indigenous women in Algiers and Bône, failed entirely for lack of pupils. More broadly, Yvonne Turin identifies what she calls a period of *refus scolaire* or boycott of French schools by notable Algerian families (their intended target) that lasted at least until the 1880s.<sup>23</sup> These families considered unacceptable to entrust their children’s education to non-Muslim and non-Arabic speaking schools. In other words, the colonialists’ attempts to seize and transform the minds and bodies of the colonized population were faced with a persistent form of mute resistance that the French found extremely difficult to overcome. For those who remained in the country, this refusal seemed to be the way to oppose, resist and endure in the face of foreign domination brought by military force and economic imperialism. The French painter-writer Eugène Fromentin commented:

Unable to exterminate us, they [the local population] suffer our presence; unable to flee, they avoid us. Their principle, their motto, their method is to remain quiet, to disappear as much as possible and to be forgotten. They demand little: they demand integrity and peace in their last refuge.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Withdrawal***

For those who remained under colonial rule, another means of resistance was to define and protect a private space against the disruptions and interference of the colonial system around them. Consequently, the areas of resistance became family, home, and the spiritual and religious life. These intimate spheres were places of refuge and perseverance of cultural practices, and identities from before the conquest. Anthropologist Jacques Berque considered religion to have become a “bastion of withdrawal” for the colonized population of Algeria to preserve their identity.<sup>25</sup> For those who refused to leave to a foreign land, it provided the means for an internal *hijra* - a personal and deeply emotional and psychological migration and withdrawal to the “inner domain”--as a form of resistance.<sup>26</sup>

In this process, seemingly non-political and personal practices underwent transformations that politicized them. In particular, women’s practices--their behavior, clothing and role in the family--acquired a political importance, and became symbols of cultural resistance to European domination, and a reflection of a growing national identity. Their fathers, husbands and brothers now viewed Algerian women as the repository of cultural identity, who needed special

protection as they became a repository for the preservation of family and societal values in the face of gradual disintegration of local culture and encroaching “Frenchification.” Because European men were particularly interested in “oriental” women--notably to paint them, later to photograph them--Algerian women were ever more under special protection of men, and more confined to their homes, reinforcing tacit resistance against foreign cultural expansion but, at the same time, increasing the gender gap and exacerbating masculinity.<sup>27</sup> In the same fashion, the veil (at that time in the form of the *haïk*, a long veil covering the whole body) acquired a new importance, as a means to protect women--and with them the core of collective identity--from the gaze of Europeans. The entire body became a means of resisting foreign disruption and intrusion.

### ***Resistance of Sufi Brotherhoods***

In this context, *sufi* brotherhoods came to play an important role in resisting French presence in Algeria. In several cases they led or supported armed insurrections against the French and provided refuge to leaders of armed insurrections after their defeat. However, according to Julia-Clancy Smith, there were also episodes during which colonial tension involving *sufi* brotherhoods peaked, without transforming into violent resistance.<sup>28</sup>

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the colonized population was mobilized to protect a *sufi* center, the *Rahmaniyya zawiya*, at the oasis al-Hamil, near Bu Sa'ada, south of Algiers, against French attempts to control it. The French had

leveled various earlier sufi centers, but this complex, built in 1863, grew to be the most popular in Algeria, boasting a prestigious school and library and surrounded by farms. Led by Sheikh Sidi Muhammad of the *Rahmaniyya* sufi order, it attracted those who wanted to benefit from his saintly *baraka* (blessing), either by following the rich curriculum provided by the school, or even by choosing to be buried on the *zawiya* grounds. People thus expressed their desire to rest in a land insulated from foreign interference. French authorities distrusted this powerful influence outside their control. They also coveted the *zawiya*'s wealth: its cash and properties of land and flocks. Sidi Muhammad had avoided confronting the French directly but resisted complying with colonial rule by insisting on his religious duty to provide refuge to fellow-Muslims, including defeated military rebels and other fugitives from the French. Between Sidi Muhammad and the French, there was "an unstated, yet mutually binding, pact, whose implicit terms granted political order in return for religious autonomy."<sup>29</sup> However, in 1897 the French saw their opportunity to take control of the *zawiya* when Sidi Muhammad died with his succession unclear.

In the conflict over succession, the French supported the claims of Sidi Muhammad's nephew, against those of his daughter, Lalla Zaynab. As a woman, they argued, she would be weak, incapable of administrating the *zawiya* effectively, and become a pliable tool in the hand of the anti-French elements. Lalla Zaynab, however, for all her apparent frailty, successfully resisted the French until her death (in 1904). First she protected the *zawiya* against her rival

by denying him access. She later demanded French protection, using the inconsistencies in the French policies, and calculating that they would not dare to evict her by force, as was indeed the case. The French found her an embarrassing character to deal with: her choices of celibacy and virginity increased her spiritual influence and social power. As Clancy-Smith points out, the story reveals “the absence of colonial mechanism for containing small-scale, nonviolent rebellions, particularly led by Muslim women,”<sup>30</sup> and emphasizes that this was also true in Tunisia, particularly where *zawiyas* were headed by women.

## **Resistance against exclusionary state policies: the struggle for citizenship**

### ***The Jeunes Algériens (Young Algerians) movement***

The shift from religious movements or opposition limited to the private sphere to a more open and public involvement in various cultural associations and political organizations coincided with the emergence of the *Jeunes Algériens* movement, early in the twentieth century. Its leaders and members were a small elite of Francophones, with a core of perhaps 1,000 members.<sup>31</sup> They were a product of French schooling who demanded that the republican principles taught at school--embodied in full French citizenship rights--be applied to the colonized population of Algeria. Their claims to citizenship, however, were always met with policies setting limitations on full citizenship. One condition for acquiring full citizenship rights was unacceptable to many who otherwise would have qualified: the requirement to relinquish Muslim legal status, and thus become subject to

the French civil code for personal matters such as marriage or inheritance. This condition many Algerians considered equivalent to apostasy, a further blow to what was left of their collective identity.

In their struggle for citizenship rights the *Jeunes Algériens* developed new institutions and practices: setting up and printing periodicals and newspapers, opening cultural and fraternal clubs, organizing political rallies, and local electoral campaigns that mobilized the elite.<sup>32</sup> More broadly, associations--particularly cultural associations--became the main tool to involve the population in forming and consolidating their collective practices separate from the French. Literature associations, music, geography, sports associations multiplied in the 1920s.<sup>33</sup> *Jeunes Algériens* saw such activities as directly linked to the vision of an aware citizen who was educated, and publicly involved in leading civic and political initiatives. This bourgeois vision of the citizen was heavily influenced by the French republican ideal. *Jeunes Algériens* newspapers published ideas for political reforms that were also promoted in manifestos, petitions and delegations sent to France. They demanded a representative parliament, fairer tax system, and equal and competitive access to the positions in administration. However, the French administration in Algeria, and French Algerian newspapers reviled them constantly for their "anti-French attitudes." Although not successful in gaining full citizenship rights, the movement's association activities laid important foundations for the emergence of other political organizations, including *Fédération des élus indigènes* (The Federation of Elected Indigenous



Representatives) that in turn helped politicize some parts of the Algerian population and was one of the roots of Algerian nationalism.

### ***Islamic reformism and the culture of nationalism***

In the 1930, another movement emerged that shared the concerns of *Jeunes Algériens* for cultural development-- the *Ulama* movement, headed by Sheikh Abdelhamid Benbadis. Within two decades, this movement became a nationwide network of schools and associations promoting a reformed version of Islam and knowledge of the Arabic language.<sup>34</sup> In doing so, it took from and continued the tradition of the movements born in Egypt of the *Nahda* (Arab renaissance) and *Islah* (Islamic reform). The logic was no longer that of finding shelter in collective identity, but of reinvigorating it by going back to its supposed roots: a *Salafi* form of Islam (following the model of the forefathers, prophet Muhammad and his companions), cleansed of *sufi* influences--notably the cult of saints in the *zawiyas*--considered to be deviations from the purportedly "original" Islam; and the propagation and diffusion of Arabic--which the colonial forces had fought against--through a modernized pedagogy.

Despite refusing to enter the institutionalized political scene (for instance, as a political party), the *Ulama* motto shows clear political implications: "Islam is my religion, Algeria my fatherland and Arabic my language." The movement developed what James McDougall calls a culture of nationalism that relied on a historical discourse of what it meant to be Algerian.<sup>35</sup> In promoting a nationalist

thought, the *Ulama* schools valued greatly teachings of history of the Arab conquest in North Africa. *Ulama* also encouraged importation from Egypt of history books promoting Arabo-Muslim history and values. This national discourse was sustained by new practices that helped a newly invented “Algerianness” become embodied in music, theater performances, or religious celebrations. For example, cultural circles organized dramatizations where school children played great figures of the Muslim or North African past. *Ulama* believed that weakened spirituality allowed for foreign domination and continued colonization. Consequently, they aimed to cleanse religious practices of those traditional aspects viewed as unorthodox or magical and therefore as spiritually weakening the Algerian population in its struggle against foreign domination.

## **Politicization of cultural forms of resistance**

The decade after the Second World War was characterized by the integration of previously highlighted nonviolent collective practices (such as cultural organizing, meetings, festivities) and their further development within the frameworks of new political parties.<sup>36</sup>

Political opening--although still limited as Algerians had fewer rights than European *colons*--allowed colonized population to participate in the legislative elections, and encouraged political forces to organize into mass parties. This resulted in the establishment in 1946 of the Union Démocratique du Manifeste algérien (UDMA) led by Ferhat Abbas and the Mouvement pour le Triomphe des

Libertés démocratiques (MTLD) led by Messali Hadj. They joined the Algerian Communist Party (PCA) in representing the colonized population.

The political parties did not limit themselves to conventional work of fighting elections and sending representatives to parliament. They became promoters of a broader form of cultural resistance not limited to the personal domain, as in earlier times. This cultural resistance became genuinely collective and creative under the auspices of the parties that took up the struggle for the creation of a collective self, for the formation of an Algerian people (although they had different definitions of what this people should be). Political parties thus became entrepreneurs of national culture. For instance, while the UDMA and the PCA considered that the Europeans living in Algeria would naturally be part of the independent country, the PPA and MTLD considered that “Algerianness” meant being Arab and Muslim. Algerian theater or musical troupes found their ways into political rallies, thus popularizing nationalist discourse. Various professional groups were often invited to political meetings to give plays, while children’s associations (notably scouts, or students of the *Ulama* schools), closely linked to one or the other party, were asked to play sketches with an explicitly nationalist, religious or moral message. The police clearly understood the impact that such events could have, and surveyed them closely, noting names of actors, themes and vocabulary used. A surveillance report written by the Oran police in September 1951 described one political meeting:

A four-act play, entitled “Union” was interpreted in Arabic by the students of the Falah school. The plays showed four brothers, feuding with each other, whose father, Atlas, was arrested and put in jail by an ambitious sultan.

Facing this situation, the children reconcile with each other, and manage to free their father. The allusion to the present is direct: the four children are the UDMA, the MTDL, the PCA and the Ulama association: they unite to fight off imperialism.<sup>37</sup>

Political parties--especially the UDMA, closely linked to *Ulama*--gradually helped set the foundations for a new nationalist history.<sup>38</sup> The party newspapers were publishing articles that contributed to the writing of a nationalist history. They commemorated nationalist figures (such as Amir Abd-al-Qadir or Abdelhamid Ben Badis), historic dates (the Manifesto of the Algeria people in 1943), and promoted Arab or Islamic history. Party rallies were ritually constructed around various carefully choreographed and sequenced installments, including commemorations of past events (notably the bloody repression of May 1945), and celebrations of nationalist figures. Any party rally included a short historical lecture, during which speakers rejected the notion that Algeria had been a wasteland before the arrival of the French; they debunked colonial scholarship (according to which, to give but one example, Berber and Arab populations differed, with the former being “closer” to Christianity and European culture than the latter), and glorified Arab history, proving its value in the face of colonial domination. Party-related activities also promoted national rites, customs, and

symbols. Several versions of the Algerian flag were popularized, patriotic national songs taught in the *Ulama* schools, or in the scout troupes were sang during rallies. The party also held conferences pertaining to topics such as morality, religion, hygiene and disease prevention during which the line between the political and the cultural, social or religious was ultimately blurred. All these nonviolent collective actions were considered necessary for shaping nationally conscious citizens, by improving their education and knowledge of Algerian history and culture, their mores, or their physical well-being.

Intensity of police surveillance and its repression led all parties--including those who opposed an armed insurrection--to find means of self-protection. Many former militants tell stories of having had meetings in the woods, away from the village, to avoid the police. Archives also reveal how parties employed their younger members to ensure security of a meeting by preventing possible police informers from entering: blocking the door, checking membership cards, warning party members of police presence to allow them to disperse. In the frequent cases where the newspapers were seized by censorship, alternative means of distribution was organized. The MTLD youth organized several campaigns during which the inscription "Algérie libre" (free Algeria) was written on the walls of the cities; leaflets were handed out rapidly and discreetly; flash-rallies were organized on market squares before the police had time to intervene.

Electoral campaigns after 1948, when the French administration systematically began to rig elections on a large scale, dramatized the conflict.<sup>39</sup> Nationalist parties, which never gave up entirely on participating in the elections, constantly tried to develop new strategies to neutralize administrative intervention in the electoral process. In Constantine in 1951, party militants were encouraged to prevent “even at the cost of their lives, the exchange of ballot boxes”<sup>40</sup>--a common form of electoral fraud. Party affiliates were also trained to be more efficient in the monitoring polling stations, and their presence on election day was such a problem for the authorities that it often led to arrests, or brawls with the police.<sup>41</sup>

Practices presented above were unconventional and involved a degree of physical engagement that went beyond traditional party politics and electoral campaigning. In a colonial context, where nationalist symbolism constituted a threat to the *status quo* and where democracy was a mere formality, the attempts to create national narratives and define the meaning of a nation, to defend and expand autonomous political space, and protect the legality of the elections, or to guard voters from police harassment became intense forms of nonviolent resistance to colonial oppression.

## **Algerian trade unionism**

Both the PCA and the MTLN had close ties with trade unions after the First World War. Most Algerian workers were affiliated with the French CGT

(Confédération générale du travail) that did not always heed the calls of their Algerian activists to discuss the national question while its leadership was reluctant to appoint Algerian nationalists to key positions. However, according to former union leader Boualem Bourouiba, unionized Algerian workers--for example, in the docks--were not all Communists, and many were members of other nationalist parties (MTLD, and to a lesser extent UDMA) after the Second World War.<sup>42</sup> Though the question of the establishment of an Algerian Union was raised, it was not until 1956 when the UGTA (Union général des travailleurs algériens), linked to the FLN, was created.

Algerian unionists had an essential role in organizing solidarity with other French occupied territories. For example, in the 1950s the Algerian dockers' unions called on workers to stop loading weapons to be shipped to French forces in Vietnam, where the French were fighting a war against a movement for independence.<sup>43</sup> These actions were in some cases coordinated with strikes in France itself, as in March 1952, when dockers in both Marseille and Oran refused to load weapons for Vietnam.<sup>44</sup>

Various examples show creativity in the use of general strikes. April 25, 1952, was declared a day of mourning in solidarity with Tunisians, where thousands of independence activists had been arrested and hundreds killed in recent months by French repression. In Algeria political parties and unions organized, throughout the country, a general strike and a series of nonviolent collective

actions such as boycotts and protests. The Constantine *préfecture* noted that in the days prior to the general strike “emissaries went around the Arab quarters of Constantine and invited Muslim women to remain at home on Friday, in particular those who worked in Europeans families.”<sup>45</sup> On April 25, collective actions took place throughout the country, with workers and shopkeepers going on strike, and street demonstrations occurring even in smaller localities. Traffic in the main Algerian ports was blocked.

Despite popular support for those actions, they remained relatively rare. Three explanations might be offered for this. Firstly, Algerian trade unionism, as an effective force in the struggle against colonialism, was weakened because of the absence of a national union, and the impossibility of reaching all segments of what was not yet a working class.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, as a consequence, political parties were the main organizers of nationwide actions, but competition between the three nationalist parties was intense and blocked strategic cooperation--the April 1952 strike was a short-lived exception. Thirdly, the political parties diverged dramatically on the advisability of mass nonviolent protest, an indecision that stemmed from the traumatic experience of the May 1945 massacres. At the day celebrating the German surrender in the Second World War, nonviolent demonstrations in eastern Algeria had turned into riots and anti-European attacks after police shot demonstrators waving an Algerian flag in Sétif.<sup>47</sup> In the days and weeks that followed, both the French authorities and armed European militias roamed the Constantine region, perpetrating summary executions and



massacres, while cruisers and aircraft carriers stationed in the Bougie bay bombed villages. Thousands were killed and most nationalist leaders were detained for several months. In the years that followed, terrifying narratives of the violence against the colonized population were circulated, including those concerning the burning of bodies in the lime-kilns of Héliopolis.<sup>48</sup>

The trauma of May 1945 set back collective involvement for years. Combined with the authorities' oppressive measures to impede unified action, and differences among nationalists over the use of alternative forms of mobilization and engagement outside the rules set by the colonial administration, Algerians felt their choice was either acquiesce by participating in the rigged and discriminatory electoral process, or reject this legal form of action in favor of armed struggle.<sup>49</sup>

## **Nonviolent actions captured by the fervor of violent struggle**

The FLN achieved its dominant position over other Algerian political factions through the use of violence against political adversaries in what was in fact an “Algero-Algerian war”,<sup>50</sup> and then through both forceful and voluntary cooptation of former political rivals. It organized several nonviolent actions as a tool for mobilization and preparation for war, with the aim of securing and showing a wide popular support. The first major initiative was a permanent strike by students that began in May 1956, without explicit demands, but expressed

support for the FLN and its goals. While appearing to be merely a boycott of French universities, the strike in fact forced the intellectual elite and prominent families to get involved. It also politicized swathes of students available now for further, more extreme actions, and attracted new recruits for the National Liberation Army with new combatants. The student permanent strike raised general disagreements over the role students and intellectuals should be playing in the national struggle: some argued that the student boycott of their education was wrong in principle and endangered the country's future intellectual capital; the counter-argument was that intellectuals should show their organic link with the population by their readiness to engage in whatever way possible or demanded by the FLN.

Similarly, the FLN used the eight-day strike in January and February 1957 to drive the population to take a public stance in support of FLN and its actions that would in turn helped the organization present itself as the legitimate voice of the Algerian people. Alongside the genuine popular support for the FLN and the national cause, there was also intensive pressure on all workers to quit their jobs, close their shops and stay home. The strike was followed in most large Algerian cities. The chosen date, 28 January coincided with the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) session adopting a resolution in favor of Algerian independence.<sup>51</sup> The strike marked the beginning of the so-called "Battle of Algiers", also known as the Great Repression of Algiers<sup>52</sup>, and was in fact used to support an ongoing armed struggle and transform the entire population of

Algiers into combatants in the war for independence--a task that became easier as a result of the subsequent disproportionate use of force and violence by French paratroopers that backfired and fuelled insurgency all over the country. By 1957, all resistance actions served the goals of advancing armed struggle. Nonviolent strategies rather than offering an alternative to violence were hijacked by the fervor of armed insurrection and subordinated to a greater imperative of waging a war.

## **Conclusion**

French colonization in Algeria was one of the most intense colonial encounters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The severity of the socio-economic disruption caused by the colonial regime and the harsh conditions of the French colonization in Algeria (including the massacres of May 1945) limited the range of possible forms of collective activities. The fact that political parties or unions developed later in Algeria than they did in other North African countries (Tunisia or Egypt) was undoubtedly linked to the breakdown of Algerian society in the face of colonization.

When armed insurrections failed to repel military conquest and occupation, the population adopted strategies of persistent endurance and survival. Emigration and more muted forms of resistance, such as withdrawal into more intimate and private domains of family life, are difficult for historians to assess. It is only with the emergence of the *Jeunes Algériens* and the development of cultural

associations in the 1920s that this endurance took on public, more constructive and collective dimensions. Collective activities became a means of moving away from simple survival to more proactive initiatives of rebuilding the social fabric and reinvigorating colonized society, despite ongoing restrictive and oppressive colonial policies.

Political parties succeeded in drawing on a repertoire of nonviolent actions to mobilize in the nationalist cause, but their lack of unity, and reluctance to use more forceful nonviolent methods such as general strikes, made them ineffective in securing serious political concessions. This partly explains the teleological narrative of the Algerian history promoted by FLN after independence, according to which armed struggle was the only viable tool to obtain independence.

Consequently, national identity construed after the colonial war was formed on a double denial of plurality--a plurality of political ideologies and nationalist parties and their contribution to the struggle for independent state; and a plurality in understandings of what "Algerianness" meant and embodied. This kind of discourse had denied in its entirety the value, role, impact and legacy of unarmed forms of collective struggle.

It was only after the 1988 demonstrations, when civic associations and political parties became legal again, that the intensity of past experiences of nonviolent organizing and actions appeared reactivated: within a few days, dozen of political parties were founded. Nonviolent practices and activist networks often with their

philosophical, institutional, and practical roots in the pre-independence period were suddenly mobilized again, thus revealing that the decades of nationalist mythology had failed to erase them entirely.

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5       Benjamin Stora, *La Gangrène et l'oubli* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998), 121-137.

6       Stora, *La Gangrène*, 161-163.

7       Benjamin Stora, *Messali Hadj : Pionnier du nationalisme algérien, 1898-1974* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986).

8       Notably Mohammed Harbi, *Une Vie debout, Mémoires politiques, tome 1 : 1945-1973* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001); Henri Alleg, *Mémoire algérienne : Souvenirs de luttes et d'espérances* (Paris: Stock, 2005); Benjamin Stora and Zakya Daoud, *Ferhat Abbas. Une utopie algérienne* (Paris: Denoël, 1995); Mohammed Benamar Djebbari, *Un Parcours rude mais bien rempli : mémoires d'un enseignant de la vieille génération (3)* (Alger: ANEP, 2002).

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- 12 Mohamed Benrabah, *Langue et pouvoir en Algérie* (Paris: Segquier, 1999), 49.
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- 15 Benjamin Stora, *La Guerre invisible, Algérie, années 90* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2001), 36.
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- 17 Kamel Kateb, *Européens, "indigènes" et juifs en Algérie (1830-1962): représentations et réalités des populations* (Paris: INED, 2001), 153-155.
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- 19 Kaleb, *Européens, "indigenes" et juifs*, 154.
- 20 Osama Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity: Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

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- 21 This sections draws from Rivet, *Le Maghreb*, 124-129.
- 22 Rivet, *Le Maghreb*, 127.
- 23 Yvonne Turin, *Affrontements culturels dans l'Algérie coloniale: écoles, médecines, religion, 1830-1880* (Algiers: Entreprise nationale du livre, 1983).
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- 25 Cited in Gilbert Meynier, *L'Algérie révélée* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1981), 245.
- 26 Julia Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800-1904)*, New Ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 7.
- 27 Jacques Berque, *Le Maghreb entre deux guerres* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1962), 324-327, and Rivet, *Le Maghreb*, 301.
- 28 The following section draws from Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint*, 214-253.
- 29 Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint*, 229.
- 30 Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint*, 239.
- 31 Vatin, *L'Algérie politique*, 171.
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- 36 The following section draws from Malika Rahal, "La tentation démocratique en Algérie. L'Union démocratique du Manifeste algérien (1946-1956)," *Insanyat* 12, no. 42 (October 2008): 79-97; Malika Rahal, "Prendre parti à Constantine: l'UDMA de 1946 à 1956," *Insanyat* 11, no. 35 (January 2007): 63-77.
- 37 CAOM (Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France), 5I 112\*, surveillance report of the Oran police, 1 September 1951
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- 43 Interview with Henri Alleg, Palaiseau (France), 20 January 2003 and Bourouiba, *Les Syndicalistes algériens*, 110.
- 44 CAOM, 5I 120, monthly report of the Police des renseignements généraux of Oran, March 1952.
- 45 CAOM, 5I 115\*, surveillance report of the Constantine préfecture, 21 April 1952.



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46 Bourouiba, *Les syndicalistes algériens*, 125.

47 Annie Rey-Golzeiguer gives a precise account of the demonstrations, distinguishing narratives on the “European” and on the “Muslim” side. Annie Rey-Goldzeiguer, *Aux origines de la guerre d'Algérie 1940-1945 : De Mers-el-Kébir aux massacres du Nord-Constantinois* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), 271-278.

48 Although a number of victims is virtually impossible to assess. Estimates range from 8,000 to 20,000 victims (i.e. below the 45,000 given by official history, which had become a mythical figure).

49 Rey-Goldzeiguer, *Aux Origines de la guerre d'Algérie 1940-1945*, 366.

50 Meynier, *Histoire intérieure*, 455.

51 Meynier, *Histoire intérieure*, 326.

52 Meynier, *Histoire intérieure*, 322-323.