

French Colonization in the Maghreb:
A Central Influence in Both Regions Today

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On April 29, 1827, the dey of Algiers made an unfortunate mistake; in the midst of an argument with French diplomats over the settlement of debts, he struck the French consul in the face with a fan (Beaver 2001). Less than two months later, French troops landed in Algeria, beginning the process of colonization that would soon give them control of the entire Maghreb region. France's conquest of Algeria sparked the imperialist movement that continued well into the 20th century, not ending until after World War II. Today, the countries of the Maghreb are still deeply intertwined with France; despite almost 50 years of independence, they have been unable to reposition themselves to be stable, self-sufficient nations. Instead, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia waver behind, struggling to define the gaps in their culture that result from the colonialist era. Indeed, although the French policy of colonialism ended years ago, its effects are still evident in France and throughout the Maghreb.

How did the French come into possession of the Maghreb?

The French acquisition of the Maghreb was not a one time event, but a campaign that continued through several decades. The process began in 1827 with the French conquest of Algeria, its first colony in the second French colonial empire. Although the fan incident is frequently cited as the cause of France's invasion of Algeria, the situation is actually much deeper than that. During the French Revolution, France borrowed large amounts of grain and money from the Jewish houses of Bacri and Busnach in Algeria (Beaver 2001). At the end of the Napoleonic Wars, when the two houses found themselves in debt to the Dey of Algiers, they began to pressure France to finally repay its debts. Additionally, the two houses informed the Dey of Algiers that they would be unable to pay their debts to Algeria without the French money. The Dey took over

negotiations at this point and began pressuring France for the money. It was during an argument over France's payments that the Dey hit the French consul with a fan, insulted over the French King's lack of response about the country's debts. To the French, this act was a personal insult of the King, and after the Dey of Algiers refused their request for an official apology, they attacked the city. Within one month, the entire country was under French occupation, where it would stay for over 100 years.

Once they held Algeria, the French began to set their sights on the neighboring countries of Morocco and Tunisia. The French began to assert their influence on Tunisia long before the invasion of the country. The French consul in Tunisia played an important role in the destruction of the Tunisian Constitution of 1860, which was disbanded in 1864 after only four years of use. In addition, they convinced Tunisia's ruler, Muhammed Bey, to create an International Financial Commission to control state expenditures. The Commission, while officially created by the Tunisian government, catered mainly to French, British, and Italian interests. In the end, it decreased Tunisia's financial independence and made it more reliant on other countries, particularly France. In 1878, the Congress of Berlin met, and France finally declared its intention of occupation of Tunisia. Germany, hoping to appease unrest over France's loss of Alsace-Lorraine in the Franco-Prussian War, quickly agreed. Britain and Italy followed, hoping their concession to France would make way for the creation of their own territories. On May 12, 1881, the French occupied Tunisia with very little resistance. In 1884, Tunisia officially became a French protectorate.

Although France had a relatively easy time with its possession of Tunisia, Morocco posed many more difficulties. Along with France, both Spain and Germany

claimed rights to the country, and Spain's close proximity made it an especially viable threat. In 1912, France prevailed and won Morocco with the exception two areas: a small coastal region that belonged to Spain and the city of Tangiers, which became an international zone. However, the Moroccan people were not very welcoming to the French, and the resistance movement in the country lasted until the mid-1930's, when the French finally defeated the mountain guerrilla movements that had sprung up across the country.

How did the countries of the Maghreb gain their independence from France?

Although France's colonies did provide many benefits to the country, they were also a burden. The longer the French remained in possession of the Maghreb, the more difficult it became for them to control their territories (French Colonial Empire 2005). During World War II, when France was run over by the German Nazis, the French colonies in the Maghreb actually came under the control of other countries. The US and Britain took control of Morocco and Algeria, using both countries to help the Allies' campaign. Germany took Tunisia, a move which facilitated fighting between the two sides.

After World War II, France regained control of her colonies, but the damage was already done. The French hold on the three countries, weakened by their almost disappearance during the war, would never return to its previous grip. In 1956, France granted independence to two of its colonies, Morocco and Tunisia, making Algeria its only remaining colony in the Maghreb. Unfortunately for both France and Algeria, this turned out to be a disaster.

During the time of Algeria's colonization, almost a million French people had immigrated to the country (France and the Arabs 2000, 52). There, they had faced a constant struggle for power against the native Algerians, who never truly accepted the French occupation of their country. When Charles de Gaulle came into power in 1958 and decided to grant Algeria independence, the French people living in Algeria, also known as *pieds-noirs*, took offense. They created a group known as Organisation d'Armée Secrète (OAS), or Secret Army Organization, which served as a resistance movement against the Fifth French Republic, headed by Charles de Gaulle. Although eventually unsuccessful, they led a campaign against important French governmental figures involved with decolonization that included several assassination attempts against Charles de Gaulle himself. Eventually the organization's infrastructure was depleted, and it dissolved into nonexistence. However, the Algerians continued their fight against the settlers, and after a massacre of *pieds-noirs* that killed more than 3,000 French settlers, the majority of the French living in Algeria left the country and returned to France. In 1962, with the French population almost gone, the country was finally granted its independence, a feat which had taken as many as 1,000,000 lives (A Country Study 1993).

What were France's policies toward its colonies?

France had its own distinct style of colonialism. Where other countries, such as Great Britain, tried to use their influence in a colony to create a relatively autonomous but productive territory, France focused its power on assimilation. It attempted to create in its colonies the same feelings of loyalty toward France that "real" French people felt. Thus, France's colonization of countries created a territory almost fully dependent on the

French government. Algeria in particular is evidence of this tendency, and although Morocco and Tunisia were more autonomous colonies, they were relatively dependent on the authority of France.

French people have always valued their culture; their language, their religion, and their form of government. Although their positions on each of these topics have changed over the years, they have always staunchly their policies and opinions. Perhaps because of this, the French felt it imperative that the people in their territories assimilate completely to their way of living. They felt a sense of superiority to others; one French proponent of colonialism, Jules Harmand, said:

It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilization... The basic legitimation of conquest over native peoples in the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but our moral superiority (Said 1993, 17).

To spread their superior civilization to the peoples of the Maghreb, the French focused mainly on the schools. French became the official language of all three countries, and the only language allowed to be taught in schools. In addition, Catholicism was promoted as the best religion; Islam was not strictly forbidden, but it was certainly seen as an inferior religion and not encourage in any way. French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville expressed the French's views on Islam when he stated:

I must say that I emerged convinced that there are in the entire world few religions with such morbid consequences as that of Mohammed. To me it is the primary cause of the now visible decadence of the Islamic world (Burke 1998).

With such ideas in mind, the French set about catholicizing an entire generation of Maghrebins, convinced that the moral superiority of France would prevail.

France also imposed many economic sanctions on its colonies. In order to justify the presence of the colonies, they needed to be economically productive. To accomplish this, the French made their colonies completely dependent on the motherland. According to one source:

The Brazzaville Conference of 1944 stated, “The aims of France's civilizing mission accomplished in the colonies rules out any idea of autonomy, any possibility of evolution outside the French empire bloc; the eventual constitution, however remote, of self-government in the colonies is out of the question” (Nosotro 2005).

France focused on creating interdependency between her markets and the markets of her colonies. Trade was mainly between different French territories, with the goal a vision of a self-sufficient “Greater France.” These policies contributed greatly to the strife seen across the Maghreb region after the war.

In addition to these policies, the French also tried to make their colonies politically loyal to France. To do this, they either wiped out the original government and replaced it with a French government, or allowed the colony to be ruled by natives on the basis that they remain loyal to France. These leaders were essentially puppets, as all of their decisions had to be in line with official French policy. The French also tried to make the indigenous people of these countries feel like they were French. However, this was not a very effective process; often, the administrators enforcing this policy were so brutal towards the indigenous people that they only increased public resentment towards the

French. In the end, this political strategy proved wholly unsuccessful, as “the average African colonial did not think of themselves as part of the French empire.”

What are France’s current views and policies towards the Maghreb?

Although colonialism as a policy ended in the sixties, it was not until the mid-1990s that the countries of the Maghreb truly began to become independent of France. Today, France retains strong political and economic ties to Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. Although it is officially uninvolved with the governments of the Maghreb, it is still very influential, and the region is very important to France’s trade.

While the government may get along with the countries of the Maghreb, the French public is much less friendly. After the Algerian war for independence, an influx of Algerians came to France looking for jobs and a new future. Today, approximately four million Maghrebins inhabit France, making them a strong minority at approximately 8% of the population. Many French people resent the strong immigrant presence of the Maghreb people, and often these people are restricted by circumstance to life in the slums of major cities such as Paris or Lyon. To combat this, the Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians who immigrated to this area have created a subculture of their own among the French culture. Although they have been economically repressed, they have created a sort of intellectual and cultural revival, especially among the young generation. As one author said, “Algeria had become a part of the daily history of France and she spoke there also-in French” (Daniel 1999, 15). Today’s French youth enjoy music imported from Algeria, and women who were not free to express themselves in Algeria find themselves liberated in France. According to one source:

An Algerian singer/songwriter “brings the roof down” when he ends his repertoire with the following remark: “Oh, you used to tell us that Algeria was France”; well, we have replied, “France is Algeria” (Daniel 1999, 15)

Despite this progress, there remains much strife between the French and their North African immigrants. Although France has a long history, it does not easily forget, and the French people remember the attacks on civilians in France by Islamic militant groups that have happened and continue to persist. It is unlikely that French distrust of Maghrebins will truly go away without the halt of these attacks.

Recently, relations between the native French citizens and those of Maghreb descent has become even more strained, as the French government, which has become increasingly secular over the years, recently outlawed the wearing of any religious symbols in France’s public schools. This decision, although more a reflection of current policy on the separation of church and state than a statement of French hatred of Islam, has increased resentment between the two groups. Muslims feel they should be able to wear the hijab they consider an important part of their religion, while many French believe that if the Muslims want to practice religion in school, they should go to private schools instead of public ones. Regardless of which opinion, if any, is right, the struggle continues.

What are the Maghreb’s current policies and views towards France?

If France’s policies have moved more towards secularism in the past fifty years, the Maghreb’s have gone in the opposite direction. With the granting of independence in the mid-1900s, the countries of the Maghreb found it difficult to adjust to making their

own decisions. France's influence stretched far beyond the idea of ruler and ruled; it was pervasive into the life of each Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian citizen.

When the French left the Maghreb, the countries of the region found it necessary to reconcile the history and culture of their past with the effects of colonialism and their present day independence. To compensate for the culture they felt was stolen from them in the 100 years of French colonialism, many of these countries turned to a process of Islamization or Arabization. They tried to ignore the fact that the French had played an integral role in their countries for 100 years and focused on matching their current events with pre-colonial history, skipping over the colonial period. Classical Arabic was brought back as the official language in all three countries, and Islam was promoted as the religion of the culture and of the region. Maghreb countries began to emphasize their cultural ties with the Middle East and tried to stamp out the presence of the French.

Ironically, despite the cultural emphasis on ignoring the presence of the French in the Maghreb, the region remained politically and economically dependent on France for several decades. After World War II, France created the Franc Zone, an economic system in African countries that used the CFA franc as currency. The system was designed to create interdependency between France and the countries of the Maghreb so that they could still support each other, even after decolonization (Pederson 2000). Unfortunately, the CFA franc became overvalued, causing trade deficits in African countries and draining the French budget. In 1994, the currency was forced by the IMF and the World Bank to be devalued by 50%, a process that devastated the economies in countries in the Maghreb. Despite this failure, the French Treasury remains essential to the economic growth of the countries in the Maghreb. Politically, the governments in the Maghreb

region have remained loyal to France. However, they have faced much challenge and resistance by Muslim extremist groups who are eager to create governments more in line with traditional Islamic law.

Today, the tensions between the Arab nationalists and French loyalists have leveled off somewhat. As the countries of the Maghreb have begun to stabilize and remake themselves into independent countries, they have started to balance the history of their nations and deal with the vast disparity between the French elite and majority of people caused by colonialism.

Are France and the Maghreb really still intertwined?

No matter one's opinion on colonialism and its benefits or disadvantages, it is impossible to dispute that it does not have lasting effects on both societies involved. France and the Maghreb still suffer and profit today from the effects of French colonization in North Africa almost fifty years ago. A French Arabist named Jacques Berque, who specialized in the North African region, once said:

France and Algeria? We did not intertwine for 130 years without being profoundly implicated in our souls and bodies. The depth of the French impact has far exceeded here the habitual alienations of colonialism, colonial exploitation, and mercantilism. A great fortune and misfortune. Here, being afflicted down to the marrow; hence the violence of this resentment, a frenzy leading to terrible adventures. But from there, perhaps, also originates the source of a solution that can only come from shared expiation (Daniel 1999, 15).

Truer words have never been said. Despite their attempts to rid themselves of the other's culture, France and the Maghreb remain intertwined with each other. Although the

French policy of colonialism ended years ago, its effects are still evident today in France and throughout the Maghreb. With almost 150 years of history intertwined, these countries share a relationship almost unknown to other countries around the globe. For better, for worse: France and the Maghreb are forever linked together.

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