



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

The Annual Historical Studies Conference
A Re-reading of the Algerian
Revolution at its 60th Anniversary

Ninth Round: 28-29 May 2022

Background Paper

Since its victory 60 years ago, the Algerian revolution has begun to disappear in Arab debates, especially within historical studies, where it appears to be confined to the annals of history. Yet the event remains one of the greatest moments of pride in modern Arab history and the reverberations of the revolution continue to raise questions in light of the current conditions in Algeria and the Arab world.

With the passage of sixty years since the Algerian revolution triumphed, an opportunity for objective study of the event presents itself to researchers. The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is consequently holding a conference to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the revolution to invite fresh perspectives on the course, outcomes and repercussions of the revolution.

The Algerian revolution was a national struggle that emerged to overthrow the French settler colonial regime and set a national project based on progressive economic, social and cultural structures. It represented not only a local phenomenon, but a major event in the Arab region and worldwide. It had repercussions for and gained a central position in the global decolonization movement. Given its seismic effect on the post-colonial world, this CFP proposes four main research themes for papers that are expected to present a revised analysis and evaluation of the Algerian revolution.

The Exceptional Characteristics and Historical Course of the Algerian Revolution

The Algerian revolution was a profound expression of the aspirations of the Algerian people to overthrow the colonial system that prevailed for more than a century (1830-1962). It was also a global phenomenon, the impact of which could not be confined to its narrow geographical scope. The victory resulted from a long and unique historical experience. The Algerian people had already confronted the destructive colonial machine in an armed resistance from 1830 - 1919 that totalled more than a hundred armed uprisings. This was followed by a political struggle (1925–1945) by parties and organizations that refused to remain silent about the miserable conditions of the Algerian people, despite their different positions on reformism, integrationism, independence and liberalism. Despite its acceptance of the colonial reality, this movement advocated against the desolate conditions of the Algerians and demanded their rights be respected by the French administration and the European settler minority (*pieds-noir*). But the movement was met with a dead end at the intransigence of the colonial system.

The nascent revolutionaries, led by Messali Hadj, were convinced that the fate of the Algerian people was in the hands of their sons and the strength of their determination to achieve freedom and independence, away from divisive ideologies, political contentions and partisanship. This is what Hadj's Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (*MTLD*) worked to embody with its armed unit, *Organisation spéciale* (OS) from which emerged the *Comité Révolutionnaire d'Unité et d'Action* (*CRUA*), which organized armed action in various parts of Algeria. Eventually, it was able to declare an armed revolution on 1 November 1954.

The Algerian revolution relied on the will of the people against the colonial power, and the revolutionaries successfully recruited popular forces from peasants in the countryside and manual labourers in the cities, based on a tight-knit organization, class unity and strict submission to the orders of the revolutionary leadership. Therefore, the Algerians who joined the revolution were strictly required to give up their party loyalties and political convictions. To ensure such a criterion, the revolutionaries established the National Liberation Front (*FLN*) which framed the revolution politically, along with the National Liberation Army (*ALN*) which framed the revolution militarily. The parties and organizations that joined the *FLN* were obligated to dissolve themselves and abide by the principles of the revolution. Collaborators (called the *Harkis*) with the French authorities were considered traitors to the revolution who should be liquidated, likewise supporters of the *FLN*'s rivals the Algerian National Movement (*Mouvement National Algérien* or *MNA*) led by Messali Hadj.

The revolution attached great importance to the human element, and considered material means merely circumstantial. It deepened the patriotic feeling linked to religious belief, nationalism, a brotherhood of arms, and cohesion between the revolutionary leaders and soldiers and the Algerian people in general, believing sacrifice and sincerity to be the basis of revolutionary action. The revolution also harnessed the experience of Algerian soldiers who served under the French flag, especially those who had fought in the Second World War and the Vietnam War. The revolutionaries took the time to train peasants and labourers in rural and urban guerrilla warfare, emphasising cohesion and creating a rupture between the Algerian people and the French administration. This was exemplified in the events of 20 August 1955 in the Northern Constantine region, which led the French forces committing extensive acts of repression and drummed up popular support for the revolution. Much of the Algerian youth joined the revolution collectively, creating an incubator among the rural people and popularising the revolution to the point of inevitability.

Authenticity and Modernity in the Algerian Revolution

We [Algerians] will win because we represent the strength of the prosperous future, and you [the French colonialists] will be defeated because you want to stop the wheel of history that will crush you, and you want to preserve a rotten past that the era has condemned to perish.

Larbi Ben M'hidi (one of the leaders of the Algerian revolution), before his execution on 5 March 1957.

The Algerian revolution was characterized by a modernist libertarian character, as it tried to combine authentic religious and linguistic dimensions, as the cohesive cement, with modern and civic principles. The revolutionary charters expressed the modernist libertarian and progressive character with civil content such as: the "Declaration of 1 November 1954"; "The Soummam Conference Document" (1956); and the "Tripoli Program" (1962), which sanctified the dignity of the Algerian human being and their freedoms. The Tripoli program called for land reform, the large-scale nationalization of

industry and services, and a strong commitment to nonalignment and anti-colonialism in foreign relations. The progressive nature of the revolution was embodied in its practical application of the principle of the right of the struggling peoples and oppressed nations to self-determination. The Algerian revolution insisted on the global dissolution of colonial rule in its foreign relations, out of respect for this basic principle. Most Arab peoples have not had to practice this and have not paid the same price the Algerians did for freedom.

Lessons Learned from the Algerian Revolution

The Algerian revolution offers lessons on how to overturn entrenched settler colonialism. It dealt with its liberation demands as non-negotiable, based on the sanctity of the goal, national consensus, and armed struggle. This was the only option to confront colonial France, which had tried to destroy the Algerian nation through its conception of a French Algeria. The leadership of the revolution realized, with experience and political acumen stemming from decades of partisan political struggle, that accepting any partial conciliation may inevitably result in a greater loss, as was the case with many other Arab causes. The main lesson of the Algerian revolution is that escaping the grip of settler colonialism military confrontation and the adoption of a national project that cannot be compromised, even if that takes several generations to triumph. The Algerian revolution thus transcended reformist thought based on the internal reconstruction of society, knowing this to be a method incapable of seizing freedom from the colonial power. This radical approach laid bare great contradictions in French society, and plunged France into a stifling political crisis, leading to the fall of the Fourth Republic, and pushing it to the brink of a real civil war. Ultimately, the only way to avoid this fate was to recognize independent Algerian statehood.

The Algerian revolution was based on the idea that military confrontation, albeit asymmetric, was the only means to revive and preserve the existence of the Algerian people in the face of the integration project. Therefore, it was necessary to close ranks and mobilize. It squashed political and personal rivalries and party leaders, and also worked to eliminate Harkis, whom it saw as an existential threat to the revolution and the unity of the Algerian people. There was no room for difference of opinion, and the requirements of democracy were postponed as a matter to be dealt with once victory was reached as the revolution assumed an any means necessary approach to confront the enemy. The settler colonial society excluded the Algerians and sought to deepen their regional, intellectual and political divisions before the revolution, which led to hollow attempts to organise and useless demands.

The revolution hence adopted the idea of class unity within the framework of collective leadership, and avoided politicking in favour of employing absolute secrecy in planning and implementation. Individualism was completely sacrificed for the sake of the group while the national interest took precedence over all other considerations. The *FLN* leadership thus focused on maintaining harmony in revolutionary action, at the expense of discussing democracy and legitimacy. The *FLN* worked to squash Messali Hadj and his followers, believing his movement to be divisive, as well as well as other

ambitious elements. When five *FLN* leaders were kidnapped and imprisoned following the French plane hijacking, the leadership took the chance to neutralise their rivalry. It restricted the moves of some leaders with Nasserite tendencies, and, in the wake of its victory, it overthrew the provisional government of the Algerian Republic — the *FLN*'s civil and diplomatic arm in Tunisia.

The Algerian Revolution: Hopes and Prospects

The Algerian revolution was a real force for change in both the urban and rural environments, and a foundational act for the Algerian state. It managed, to a large extent, to dismantle the human and material components of colonialism and restore the lost sources of wealth, to link the history of contemporary Algeria with the pre-colonial period.

There is no doubt that the violence of the Algerian revolution and the depth of the resultant transformations created a counter-revolution nurtured by French cultural and intellectual colonialism, which controlled the administrative apparatus inherited by the revolution after independence. This precluded the completion of the liberation project of the Algerian revolution, which turned from a creative and influential popular uprising to a regime that focused on establishing a national state on the ruins of the colonial system. After winning independence, the emerging leadership began seeking to accumulate wealth, obtain positions and privileges, achieve personal ends, and maintain ties with the former colonizer.

The Problems Posed by the Historical Experience of the Algerian Revolution

The Algerian revolution today rises a number of historical problematiques that can be addressed objectively, now that half a century has passed from the event. These problematiques are not an assessment of a unique historical experience; they do not affirm or negate facts, even if they are a source of embarrassment for or challenge to the convictions of the researcher. Rather; they relate to the nature, effects and outcomes of the revolutionary struggle of the Algerian people. Such problematiques can be framed in a series of questions:

The first question: Was the Algerian revolution just a war of independence against a foreign colonizer, or was it a revolution aimed at liberating the land and people and resurrecting the Algerian state, or was it of a dual nature, as a war of independence against the colonizer and a renewal movement to build Algerian society and resurrect its state at the same time? In that case, the Algerian revolution is a process built on complex premises, goals and interactions, resulting from an attempt to overcome the crisis of the radical independence movement led by the People's Party, and then MTLN from 1952 - 1954. The revolution combined the vitality of the city and the depth of the countryside, and included various social groups with the specific goal of achieving independence, before ending in

a struggle for power between the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (*GPRA*) and The Chiefs of Staff of the National Liberation Army and its supporters within the leadership of some historical provinces in the interior. While the *GPRA* leadership's political doctrine had been developed during years spent living abroad, mixing socialist ideas with liberalism, the Liberation Army leadership continued to live the dream of the revolution and was associated with the simple peasants and workers, believing that the revolution should not be handed over to a bourgeois class that would replace the society of European *pieds-noir*, but should be a means to achieve populist socialist demands.

The revolution lost lustre as a result of the conflict between the two currents, which became entrenched in the wake of Algeria's independence. Revolutionary triumph soon turned into psychological defeat as it lost credibility and its ideals evolved into rivalry and a resurgence of regional and partisan differences that contradicted the values of the revolution. Meanwhile, the regime acquired a hybrid military and civil character, and the *FLN* became a party to represent the face of the government. The political elites and social forces were subordinated to administrative bodies, so that attention was focused on building state structures and institutions and the material foundations associated with social services and economic development. However, the administration's governance and bureaucracy, the opposition to interest groups in the state apparatus, and the focus on material development, are all factors that led to the neglect of the Algerian human being and the consolidation of the values of citizenship. This delayed the completion of the revolution project following the failure of late President Houari Boumédiène's "Three Revolutions" (agricultural, industrial, and cultural) project.

The second question relates to whether the Algerian revolution has been subject to a counter-revolution, the effects of which were not felt in the moment. However, French military pressure, General Charles de Gaulle's attempts to isolate the revolution under the "Constantine Project," and the expansion of French education, integrating Algerians within French culture, were factors that led the revolution to focus on military action internally and political advocacy abroad, weakening its grip on the population. At the time, many Algerians were forced to move to camps and gathering sites under the watch of the French army; laying the ground for the emergence of a social force that would remain hidden.

However, the competition for power following the Evian Accords led to a disassociation from the values and ethics of the revolution. Those who were once brothers in arms competed and began to search for social privileges and interact with French culture, encouraged by the behaviour of some revolution leaders who threw off their revolutionary commitments and looked for power in the new state. At the forefront of this were military officers who had worked in the French army before joining the revolution and securing commanding posts due to their professional experience and competence under the rule of the late President Chadli Bendjedid.

The third fundamental question related to the Algerian revolution concerns the marginal role of the elites, of various revolutionary affiliations, and the impact of isolating those with experience in the

national struggle from leadership positions. These elites were mainly restricted to administrative, cultural, and media roles, while some were placed under surveillance, which prevented them from gaining influence or adopting a political role. Was this due to the fear of reformist intellectual convictions (*Jam'iyat al-'Ulama*) or liberalism (Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty)? Was it due to the fact that in the pre-revolutionary activity of the national movement, most members were hesitant or reticent about the revolutionary action and joined the revolution later, as a personal endeavour? Was it due to the initial reticence of most members of the national movement towards the revolution in its early days? Most of these elites were alienated from the rural and marginalized urban society that had lent the revolution its popular core and provided its military strength. The association of the revolution with marginalized urban society (the labourers and the unemployed) and the rural peasant masses played an important role in removing the traditional political leaders from the reins of the revolution and encouraged populist (and later socialist) choices in the style of government. For a while, the friction with French society prevented the emergence of liberalism. The subject of democracy, public freedoms, and individual rights were not spoken of outside the concept of revolution during the armed struggle and even during the post-independence nation building period.

In the same context, decisions on national identity were postponed. Despite the importance of defining the character and cultural policy of the state, the revolution intentionally neglected the identity of Algeria in the November 1st Principles, the Soummam Platform, and the Tripoli Program and was content with loose slogans such as that fortifying independence requires the recovery of identity as defined by the National Movement. However, the development of events proved that the impact of the long-term French presence would force the issue of identity into discussion. French culture and Western lifestyle dominated the daily life of Algerians, which later led to a clash of convictions, preventing Algeria from developing its cultural independence. Consequently, hostility emerged in the shape of ethnic, faith, cultural and local differences.

The Literature and the Nature of Algerian Revolution-related Narratives

Documentation of the Algerian revolution has remained limited despite its importance for Algeria, its resounding success, its international impact, its status in Arab memory, and its inspirational position for third world liberation movements.

Scholars engaging the history of the Algerian revolution are met with great difficulty in accessing sources, whether in terms of general literature or specialized research. Most of what has been published in Algeria so far has been dominated by media snippets, event narratives, tales of individual heroism and ideological theses. Most of this production is within the genre of diaries, memoirs and opinion pieces. From 1962-1987, 250 titles were published by Algerians, alarming

many writers and the regime. The late President Chadli Bendjedid encouraged the *FLN* and the Mujahideen Organization to hold conferences and meetings for those who participated in the revolution. The initiative resulted in many regional seminars, three national forums, in which the testimonies and narratives presented were published in several volumes (1982-1984). In parallel, the Algerian National Archives, the National Center for Historical Studies, and later the National Center for Research on the National Movement and the Revolution of November 1, 1954, worked on developing files, collecting available documents, and encouraging researchers to write on the history of the revolution. But this remained limited in comparison with the magnitude of documenting the Algerian revolution.

Despite these initiatives, speculation remains about the reasons Algerian efforts failed to appropriately preserve the memory of the revolution. Perhaps part of the answer lies in the fear of and insecurity about the revolution. The revolution represents a court that condemns traitors and prevents those who try to hijack it from exploiting it. In fact, one of the reasons for the lack of documentation about the Algerian revolution is due to the nature of the political regime, whose legitimacy was linked to the revolution. Preferring to monopolize and establish itself as its exclusive spokesperson of the revolution, the regime chose a selective presentation of the revolutionary events with no room for the perspectives of opposition or revisionists. Individual behaviour accounted for much of the reservations about writing on the revolution. Many people were hesitant to publish revolutionary documents for fear of condemnation or and many attached such a sacred status to the revolution that they feared its treatment as a human act, with negatives and positives. Some of them viewed it as a personal gain that must be preserved, because for them it was a source of gains and privileges.

Meanwhile the ambitious career climbers serving the regime were preoccupied with politics and job requirements; they were no longer interested in publishing the documents in their possession about the revolution. Others preferred silence and their opposition to the regime and its symbols distracted them from recording their revolutionary exploits due to the mutual association between regime and revolution, reluctant to praise or justify the acts of their opponents. Many revolutionary fighters were unable to record their testimony and collect evidence due to psychological traumas or illiteracy and their experiences were lost to future generations with their passing. Regardless of the behaviour of revolutionaries, the responsibility remains on the intellectuals and historians, especially those who lived through and were influenced by the revolution, and those who considered themselves historians but toed the regime line when it came to recording the history of the revolution.

This failure in the memory of the Algerian revolution has had significant consequences. It caused serious frustrations that harmed the moral balance of the revolution, and contributed, albeit indirectly, to putting an end to the dream that it embodied and the aspirations of generations. This failure helped encourage the counter-revolution to undermine the gains of the revolution.

The Quantitative and Qualitative in French Historical Writings on the Algerian Revolution

The French antagonist's documentation of the revolution was better in terms of both quality and preservation of historical writings. The French consider them French documents, on the grounds that Algeria, in their view, was part of France until its independence. French scholarly strength rendered the French presence a tyrant in the history of the Algerian revolution, both in its reservoir of documentation and in its historical content. The French became a de facto partner in documenting the revolution, which encouraged the French government to enter a scholarly partnership with Algeria regarding the common historical memory related to the colonial period and the revolution. Recently, the French historian, Benjamin Stora, presented a report on "progress made in France on the memory of the colonisation of Algeria and the Algeria War."

Regardless of the French view of the revolution's history and the quality of the documents they have about it, France set a precedent for writing and documenting the history of the revolution. Under the reign of General Charles de Gaulle alone (until 1970), 805 titles about the revolution appeared in France. After that, historical publications on the Algerian revolution proliferated to form a semi-integrated historical library that included Algerian historians working within the French cultural space, led by the historian Mohamed Harbi. This forced the National Center for Research on the National Movement and the Revolution of November 1st, 1954 in Algeria to translate many of these important titles, starting in the 1990s.

The French archives store huge collections on the Algerian revolution, stored in over 5,000 containers, covering the period 1924 - 1967. Some of these files were transferred from Algeria on the eve of its independence (general mandate archive), and another section was produced by the offices, military delegates and regional leaders of the French army operating in Algeria. Part of this archive was opened to researchers in the early 1990s (1992) This poses questions about Algeria's own archive, and the need to work to preserve its memory and keep it alive.

The research in historical writings on the Algerian revolution should not be limited to Algerian and French writings, but also Arab writings, with focus on the national dimension and Arab support for the struggle of the Algerian people. The work of researchers outside Algeria, France, and the Arab world, is equally important because it provides objective insight into the events, without being subject to their consequences.

In conclusion, the Algerian revolution represents a unique and complex historical phenomenon. Writing about it requires rigorous analysis, comparative study and evaluation, according to objective research conditions independent of political and ideological leanings. The study of the Algerian revolution must be freed from individual monopoly, regime tyranny and the suppression of opposition in order to maintain its liberating and human dimensions.

Conference themes

- The Arab dimension of the Algerian revolution.
- The global dimension of the Algerian revolution.
- The interaction between the national dimension, the pan-Arab dimension, and the global human dimension of the Algerian revolution.
- The implications of the Algerian revolution for contemporary Arab and international environments.
- The Algerian revolution in the long term.
- The phenomenon of resistance in contemporary Algerian history.
- The historical context and roots of the Algerian revolution.
- The transition from partisan political work to armed struggle.
- The sanctity of popular unity and the issue of ideological difference in the revolution.
- Methods of recruitment and mobilization in the Algerian revolution.
- Radicalism in the Algerian revolution: the all-or-nothing principle.
- The realist/idealist dialectic in the Algerian revolution.
- Interaction between the values of authenticity and cultural belonging and progressive and modernist ideas in the Algerian revolution.
- The romantic dimension in the Algerian revolution.
- Collective leadership, the people and the leader in the Algerian revolution.
- Readings on the charters of the Algerian revolution.
- The Algerian revolution and the exploitation of the contradictions of French society.
- Military methods adopted during the Algerian revolution.
- The Algerian revolution between tactics and strategy.
- The negotiation method adopted in the Algerian revolution.
- The Algerian revolution and the issue of legitimacy and democracy.
- The Algerian revolution's treatment of defectors and opponents.
- The Algerian revolution's treatment of collaborators.
- The individual and the group in the Algerian revolution.
- The presence of the Algerian revolution in the Algerian collective memory.
- The evolution of revolutionary discourse in Algeria after independence.

- How the Algerian revolution dealt with the colonial legacy.
- The nature of the Algerian revolution: between a war of independence and a revolution of liberation.
- The Algerian revolution and the question of power and legitimacy after independence.
- The Algerian revolution and the development project.
- The Algerian revolution and the pre-independence counter-revolution.
- The Algerian revolution and the post-independence counter-revolution.
- The Algerian revolution and the issue of national values and parameters.
- Social forces within the revolution and their contradictions before and after independence.
- The Algerian revolution against the challenge of pragmatism.
- The Algerian revolution and the reformist religious elites.
- The Algerian revolution and the integrationist liberal elites.
- Elitism and populism in the Algerian revolution.
- The Algerian revolution and the issue of identity and national unity.
- The nature of the writings and memoirs of the actors in the revolution.
- The nature of Algerian academic production related to the Algerian revolution.
- The issue of Algerian revolution archives.
- Evolution of the policies on writing the history of the Algerian revolution.
- The unwritten history of the Algerian revolution.
- French historical writings on the Algerian revolution.
- The dilemma of colonial memory and how the French dealt with it.
- French archives on the Algerian revolution.
- The quantitative and qualitative aspects of the Arab historical writings on the Algerian revolution.
- The quantitative and qualitative aspects of foreign non-French historical writings on the Algerian revolution.
- The Algerian revolution in the French, Arab and international media.

Participation

- The conference committee will receive research proposals (approx. 700 words), accompanied by an academic CV, in Arabic or English, no later than 1 December 2021, provided that they

include: the research question(s), a basic hypothesis, the methodological and theoretical frameworks, and approaches/results, with a list of references.

- The research proposal is subject to internal selection process, and the researcher is informed the decision to accept, decline or request amendments, within two weeks of sending the proposal.
- The conference committee's approval of the research proposal is not an approval of the entire research paper to be included in the conference.
- Researchers whose proposals were approved by the conference committee should send their complete papers (6000-9000 words), according to ACRPS guidelines no later than 15 March 2022, to be subject to peer-review. The research should be authentic and unpublished, either in whole or in part on any other platform.
- A specialized organising committee will review the research, and the committee is obligated to inform the researcher, or researcher, of the decision to approve, decline or request any amendment to the paper no later than 30 April 2022.
- All correspondence should be directed to the conference email address: history.conference2022@dohainstitute.org.