

France and Algeria: Cultural Belonging amidst Political Conflict, by Jiayi Chen

On the night of July 12, 1998, the words “Merci Zizou” lit up the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. France had just won its first World Cup, and the hero was Zinedine Zidane, a midfielder born in Marseille to immigrants from Algeria. On the Champs-Élysées, crowds waved French and Algerian flags side by side. For one night, two countries scarred by a century of colonial violence seemed to have found a single identity. But the story of France and Algeria is one of two nations bound together by a shared culture even as their politics tear them apart, revealing how cultural intimacy and political rupture can coexist.

France and Algeria’s complex diplomatic relations emerged from France’s colonization of Algeria from 1830-1847. When France invaded in 1830, it legally absorbed Algeria as three *départements* of France itself, not as a faraway colony. On paper, Algeria was part of France. However, under a set of laws called the *Code de l'indigénat*, most Algerians were classed as French “subjects” and not “citizens”; thus, they belonged to France, but had almost no rights. Pieds-noirs (European settlers) controlled the livelihoods of Muslim Algerians, around 90% of the population, through urban segregation, economic disruption, and religious assimilation. French was imposed as the language of administration and schooling, planting a linguistic bond.

The need for labor and military recruitment propelled a mass wave of Algerian migration to France in the twentieth century. After World War II, during France’s economic boom known as *les Trente Glorieuses* (1945–1975), France needed labor, and Algerians filled in huge numbers. Accordingly, the 1947 Statute of Algeria gave Algerian men French citizenship and free movement across the Mediterranean. They later even served as *travailleurs invités* (guest workers) to help rebuild post-WWII France. What resulted was the Algerian population in France rising from about 22,000 in 1946 to over 211,000 by 1954. Although fueling the country’s industrial growth, Algerian labourers, often referred

to as *Shibanis*, faced severe discrimination, poor living conditions in slums, and low wages, often being concentrated in Parisian slums and workers' hostels.

What emerged from this active discrimination was patriotic sentiments that defined early Algerian nationalist movements like the *The Étoile Nord-Africaine*, founded in Paris in 1926 by Messali Hadj. In 1954, a group of Algerian nationalists who concluded that armed revolution was the only choice to end French rule created the National Liberation Front (FLN) that fought for Algerian independence primarily through Guerilla Warfare. During the Battle of Algiers, the FLN planted bombs in public places such as cafés and other civilian locations frequented by Europeans. On November 1, 1954, known as *Toussaint Rouge* (Red all Saints' Day), the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) began. Filled with torture and massacres on both sides, it ended 132 years of French rule as Charles de Gaulle, the President of France, signed the Évian Accords on March 18, 1962, agreeing to a ceasefire and eventually leading to France's recognition of Algeria's independence on July 3, 1962. Migration continued even during the war—the Algerian population in France grew from 211,000 in 1954 to 350,000 by 1962. Although Algeria was fighting France for independence, Algerians continued moving to France for work because colonialism had bound both countries together.

By the 1990s, the children of Algerian workers became French citizens by birth. The question had changed from “should they be here?” to “are they truly accepted?” From a unique cultural lens, football briefly seemed to answer yes. Citizens celebrated the 1998 World Cup team as “Black-Blanc-Beur”—black, white, Arab—a play on the colors of the French flag. Zidane, whose Kabyle Algerian parents left Algeria in 1953, became the team's symbol, and their victory signaled that true social acceptance was possible. However, players knew that the unity was thin and temporary. Defender Lilian Thuram later called the Black-Blanc-Beur idea “a slogan.” Zidane himself reportedly dismissed it as a “media invention.” Even far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, who had complained the team was not “a real French team,” still called Zidane “a son of French Algeria.”

The cracks materialized on October 6, 2001, when France played Algeria in football for the first time ever. Even as the players were introduced as “messengers of peace,” the French anthem was loudly booed, flags were burned outside, and in the 76th minute fans stormed the pitch, causing the match to be abandoned.

Football only represented one side of the cultural relation. Beneath it ran language, family, music, and memory, ties that were upheld even as the two states entered open conflict. Today France and Algeria are in what is described as their worst crisis since independence in 1962. In July 2024, when French President Emmanuel Macron backed Morocco’s claim that Western Sahara should remain under Moroccan sovereignty, Algeria immediately withdrew its ambassador from France, because it went against Algeria’s foreign policy support for the Sahwari independence movement. From there the situation spiraled to tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats in April 2025, strict French visa limits on Algerians in August 2025, and Algeria scrapping old diplomatic agreements in reciprocation. French-Algerian novelist Boualem Sansal and journalist Christophe Gleizes, two prominent writers built between two cultures, were jailed in Algeria on national security and terrorist charges. Then, on December 24, 2025, Algeria’s parliament unanimously passed a law declaring French colonization a crime and demanding an apology and reparations. The BBC noted observers saw relations at their “lowest” since independence.

French President Macron had gone further than any leader before him, calling colonization a “crime against humanity” in 2017, admitting France used torture, and commissioning the 2021 Stora report on colonial memory. However, he refused to formally apologize, saying bluntly, “I don't have to apologise... this word would break all ties.”

In early 2026, Paris and Algiers entered a gradual deescalation and political thaw. France’s ambassador, Stéphane Rometet, returned to Algiers after the resumption of talks on security and migration. But analysts describe it as “transactional” and “conditional”,

not driven by trust and true concession. Multiple French officials, including Deputy Armed Forces Minister Alice Rufo and G rald Darmanin have also visited Algiers to rebuild practical cooperation. Additionally, in a significant nod to memory-politics, French delegates attended ceremonies commemorating the 1945 S tif massacre of Algerian protesters by French colonial troops.

Firstly, the France-Algeria story shows how identity can be plural. Zidane was fully French and proudly Algerian. The crowds that waved both flags in 1998 showed that people can belong to two nations at once. Essentially, global citizenship begins by accepting that belonging need not be singular. But legal citizenship is not the same as real cultural belonging. The children of Algerian migrants gained French passports, but many still experienced exclusion and cultural discrimination. In 2025, a group of dual nationals warned in *Le Monde* that some French citizens must “constantly prove their belonging” while others are treated as its “natural guardians.” Zidane was embraced partly because he remained quiet, fitting the image of the “respectable immigrant.” If acceptance depends on a minority behaving “acceptably”, it is not full citizenship. Real belonging means being *seen* as a part of a whole.

In terms of international cooperation, the France-Algeria story shows that people-to-people ties can significantly outlast broken government systems. Algerians kept migrating even during the war, and millions of families remain woven across the Mediterranean today even amidst the crisis. Human bonds have proven to be more durable than political ones, especially when millions of French citizens have Algerian descent, are dual nationals, and have families across borders. Despite decades of Arabization, French remains spoken widely by Algerians, and Algerian music and food are woven into French life as well. The two cultures are no longer separable.

Second, “memory politics” must be addressed, as real cooperation cannot be built while ignoring history. The modern crisis shows how the unresolved colonial past poisons everything, and historian Benjamin Stora warned that “a mere formal apology wouldn't

fundamentally change the situation,” noting that Japan's repeated apologies to South Korea and China had little effect. Reconciliation requires sustained joint commissions, education, exchange, beyond simple political words or gestures.

Finally, cooperation alone is inherently fragile and must be constantly tended in today's world order characterized by polarization and fragmentation. The Macron-Tebboune rapprochement in 2022 collapsed immediately within two years over a France's decision in 2024 to support Morocco's claim over the disputed territory of Western Sahara.

Additionally, symbols carry enormous weight as one football match in 2001 froze sporting ties for over two decades. International cooperation is never simply “achieved”; like a great football team, it must be built, defended, and earned again and again, with France and Algeria showing how easily it can be lost. The relationship between these two nations is still being written. Cultural relations, even when forged in violence, can survive political conflict, but it also warns that simple survival is not the same as true healing achieved through understanding, concession, and mutual reparations. Belonging, between peoples as within a nation, must be earned, honestly and repeatedly, by both sides.

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