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Algeria

# “In Algeria, what is fundamental is the state”

- Features -



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**In this previously unpublished interview conducted in June 2012, shortly before the fiftieth anniversary of Algerian independence, historian and former FLN leader Mohammed Harbi traces Algeria's political trajectory from colonial formation to post-independence bureaucratic rule. Harbi analyses how the absence of a mature social class capable of imposing its dominance led to a political personnel drawn from emigrant workers and the urban petty bourgeoisie. He distinguishes between the civilian authoritarianism of Ben Bella, who attempted to insert the FLN into society and put self-management on the agenda, and the military authoritarianism of Boumediene, who reduced the FLN to a symbol subordinate to the army. Harbi also examines the ambiguous relationship of the French left to Algerian independence. [AN]**

Speaking with the doyen of historians of the Algerian War, with his age of 79 and his face still lit up with a child's smile, with his immaculate white hair, one has the impression of being in front of a dervish: always silently immersed in his books, meticulous to the point of splitting hairs, never giving in to idealization, not even demonizing his enemies, tirelessly pursuing the truth. And yet, when reading his memoirs [1], we discover a man of action in his own right. Having joined the Algerian People's Party aged only fifteen [2], Mr. Harbi held positions of responsibility in the France Federation of the FLN [3], worked in Krim Belkacem's [4] cabinet, participated as an expert in the Evian negotiations in May 1961 [5], and then, after independence, was an adviser to President Ahmed Ben Bella. [6], he was sentenced to five years in prison and three years of house arrest for founding the Organization of Popular Resistance [7], before going into exile abroad and embarking on an academic career. [8] There is no other example of an actor so deeply involved in the events who has approached the history of Algerian independence with such critical rigor.

While still a presidential adviser, Mr. Harbi opposed the manipulation of trade union congresses, the emphasis on Islam in the identity law, and adopted a critical stance by condemning torture in an editorial in *Révolution africaine* [9], the magazine of the FLN that he headed. From the congress of April 1964, he came to the conviction that the FLN was no longer reformable. The victory of the “military bureaucracy” was underway. In fact, a year later, Boumediene's coup d'état was to take place.

### **How should we evaluate, fifty years later, the Algerian war of independence?**

Fifty years later, the essential thing today is to understand Algeria's political trajectory. To do this, we must go back a long way and start by questioning what Algeria is. When it comes to this country, historians often embark on a history of the nation-state, as if the nation-state were something that was inevitably imposed on the people. However, it is impossible to understand the history of Algeria outside the context of its formation.

This formation took place, until 1962, under imperial conditions: first the Romano-Byzantine Empire, then the Ottoman Empire, and finally the French Empire. Algeria is the product of all this history, both a local history and a history of integration into these empires. An important point must be emphasized: when Algeria became a French colony, it went through a history of extreme violence; all the constituent elements of the social fabric were fragmented.

The entry of capitalism into Algeria was brutal. The country was not transformed as a whole: contrary to what one might think, two Algerias were formed – the interior of the country, which continued to be administered according to Ottoman principles, and the coastal zone, which underwent a certain development through institutions more or less

reminiscent of those of France. In other words, the social structure had, to a certain extent, features in common with France. What differentiated Algeria from the Ottoman Empire was the complete bureaucratization and centralization of the political structure.

It is in this context that political phenomena have been constituted. A capitalist system, two different countries within the same country, and new social classes that could be said to have been born in the wake of capitalism. On the one hand, as almost everywhere: a world of work, a working class; on the other, a capitalist class, but not a bourgeois capitalism – a colonial capitalism – and an extremely weak intelligentsia. Such was the social dynamic of Algeria. No class had reached maturity. This is why, since no class was able to impose its domination, the political personnel called upon to lead Algeria were recruited from among Algerians who had emigrated to France and from the urban petty bourgeoisie. This bourgeoisie was both socially and culturally deeply fragmented: despite French cultural domination, the Arabic language and Muslim culture – although weakened – continued to exist in the country. Yes, they had been greatly impoverished.

In such a situation, after successive insurrections that lasted almost until the end of the 19th century, armed uprisings began to break out, and we witnessed the birth of a political movement that arose almost instantaneously. This movement was not homogeneous, as was the case in Tunisia or Morocco. The political elite was also deeply divided, between those who had been culturally formed in the shadow of colonialism and the old classes. When the movement accelerated, it was under the influence of the old culture, but was also inspired, to a certain extent, by the ideas of the French Revolution, and especially those of the Soviet Revolution – but only on the formal level. This is an important element in understanding Algeria, because Algeria had two political vocabularies: that of the French Revolution and that of the Soviet Revolution, used to translate social realities that had no relation to the very foundations of these revolutions...

When the revolution began, in 1954, what immediately came to the fore was the formation of a military-type bureaucracy. In Algeria, it is also possible to observe a pattern somewhat reminiscent of that of Latin America. At the beginning, there really was absolute egalitarianism. But after many years, once independence was achieved, society began to gradually transform. With bureaucratization and statization, a new bourgeoisie has emerged, a bourgeoisie of the bureaucratic type. Without the state, it was nothing. For a long time, it found a compromise with the popular classes under the protection of the state. But today, we are seeing the emergence of nuclei that defend economic liberalism while rejecting political liberalism. They live in the shadow of the state. In Türkiye too, in a more consistent way, we have experienced the same phenomenon. In Algeria, the bourgeoisie has not yet succeeded in becoming a real economic power; the essential remains the state. Even in the economic field, the bourgeoisie has still not acquired decisive strength: in Algeria, what is fundamental is the state. The bourgeoisie today is trying to gradually detach itself from the state, but without adhering to political liberalism.

### **What is the difference between Ben Bella and Boumediene?**

Ben Bella and Boumediene are both nationalists. Both are at the head of an authoritarian regime. But their styles, their approaches, are different. Ben Bella comes from a political party; it is therefore open to society. Boumediene, on the other hand, is a soldier, entirely shaped within the framework of the army. For him, the army is at the centre of society. This was not the case under Ben Bella. When he came to power immediately after independence, the mass departure of Europeans had created a social vacuum in the country. This vacuum was filled by groups from the people. Ben Bella relied on such a social base, whereas Boumediene's social base was the military bureaucracy. This is why Ben Bella has, at one point, put the option of self-management on the agenda. [\[10\]](#) But this option did not find social support within the working class.

Algeria in the 1960s was a space of social recomposition. Those who were workers had progressed in the social hierarchy. These were people from the countryside, who had invested in cities that had been European until then.

This naturally created – until Ben Bella's departure – an extremely chaotic situation. While Ben Bella tried to insert the FLN into society, under Boumediene, it was no longer possible to speak of the FLN as an entity distinct from the army. When he came to power, Boumediene reportedly told FLN leaders that he wanted the FLN to be “like a ship moored at the dock.” It would not sink, but it had to remain motionless, without moving. It would be nothing more than a symbol, without an autonomous existence in relation to the state and the military structure.

With Ben Bella, the situation was different: the FLN was a civilian party, but still in the phase of formation. The war had been terrible; By 1957, all civil society organizations had disappeared. The pre-1954 political structure had some consistency, but it had been completely swept away in favour of a new structure. The Algerian elites had either emigrated or were in prison or detention. Under these conditions, the new structure had an extremely low profile. Without these social data, it is impossible to understand Algeria.

### **How do you assess the return to favour of the old politicians? Can we speak of a form of normalization of history?**

We can talk about it, yes, but within certain limits. In other words, yes, the old politicians are coming back, they are being given back their place in history, but there is no explanation of why they disappeared, or why they are reappearing today. It's a bit like in the former Eastern European countries. We start by breaking their courage, then... For a people, it is essential to understand what happened to them.

### **Can we talk a little about how we should evaluate the approach of the French left?**

In the 1920s, and especially in the 1930s, the French left was made up of individuals who reacted to the brutality of colonialism. But colonialism as such was not questioned, it never was. And from 1917 onwards, it was the Communists who addressed national and colonial questions. Until 1924, 1925, 1926, they had a very clear position on the Algerian question. With the process of Stalinization, Algeria was no longer thought of within the framework of the French Empire. The organizing principle of the political vision was Soviet policy.

In the 1930s, from the point of view of the Algerian Communist Party, which was an extension of the French Communist Party, the main danger was Italy and Germany, i.e., the dangers that threatened the Soviet Union. When the nationalists were asked to support the anti-fascist front, they refused, saying, “If you accept national liberation, then we will defend it.” So, there was a conflict between the two movements.

From 1946 onwards, the new danger to the Soviet Union was the United States. We were repeating what we had done before in a political world run by the great powers: on the one hand France, England and America, on the other Italy and Germany. But during the war, there was a form of anti-colonialism articulated around three axes: the struggle against oppression, the struggle for peace; however, on the Communist side, no clear position was taken on the national question.

However, during the war, a new current emerged: this current was favourable to Algerians and provided them with material aid. For example, here in France, one of the important sources of the FLN's capacity for action was precisely the material and logistical support provided to it by the French left. [\[11\]](#) When we began to perceive the real framework of the situation, there was, for example, a movement of desertion. Twelve thousand people deserted so as not to go to war in Algeria. The official parties, the major parties, including the Communist Party and other left-wing parties, did not support obedience – contrary to the official doctrine. [\[12\]](#)

This is why, until today, Algerians have been particularly sensitive to nationalist discourses claiming that they have received no support from the French left. Because this is not entirely accurate. This is an extremely delicate issue.

But it's a common trait of all nationalisms: me first...

[(Note by Masis Kürkçügil: *This interview was conducted at Harbi's home in June 2012. At the end of the discussion, he uttered the following sentence, which I had not used, deeming it inappropriate for the popular history journal in which the interview was to be published: "The role of the Fourth International in the Algerian war is undeniable."* The Fourth International's involvement in the Algerian war of independence was extensive and carried significant risks for its members. Michel Raptis (Pablo), a leader of the Fourth International, was arrested in Amsterdam in 1960 along with his Dutch comrade Sal Santen for organising material support to the FLN, including the production of forged documents and the smuggling of funds. Their trial became a cause célèbre of the European left. After independence, Raptis served as an adviser to the Ben Bella government, supporting the self-management project. See Alex de Jong, "[Michel Raptis, the struggle for Algeria and the risks of solidarity](#)", ESSF, August 2025.)]

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[1] Mohammed Harbi, *Une vie debout. Mémoires politiques, tome 1 : 1945-1962*, La Découverte, 2001.

[2] The Parti du peuple algérien (PPA, Algerian People's Party) was founded in 1937 by Messali Hadj as a successor to the banned Étoile nord-africaine (North African Star). It was the principal vehicle of Algerian nationalism until the outbreak of armed struggle in 1954. See Ian Birchall, "[Algeria: Hadj-Ali Abelkader: A Muslim Communist in the 1920s](#)", ESSF.

[3] The Front de libération nationale (FLN, National Liberation Front) was founded on 1 November 1954 to lead the armed struggle for Algerian independence from France. After independence in 1962, it became the sole ruling party until 1989. The France Federation was its organisational structure among Algerian workers and emigrants in metropolitan France. See Alex de Jong, "[Michel Raptis, the struggle for Algeria and the risks of solidarity](#)", ESSF, August 2025.

[4] Krim Belkacem (1922-1970) was a historic leader of the Algerian revolution who led the Kabyle maquis from 1947 and became one of the nine founders of the FLN's armed struggle in 1954. He headed the Gouvernement provisoire de la République algérienne (GPRA, Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic) delegation during the Evian negotiations. He was assassinated in Frankfurt in 1970 by agents of the Boumediene regime.

[5] The Evian negotiations between France and the GPRA took place in several rounds beginning in May 1961, culminating in the Evian Accords of 18 March 1962 which established a ceasefire and the conditions for Algerian self-determination. A referendum on 1 July 1962 resulted in an overwhelming vote for independence.

[6] Ahmed Ben Bella (1916-2012) was the first President of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria (1963-1965). A historic leader of the FLN and one of the nine founders of the armed struggle, he was overthrown in a coup d'état by Houari Boumediene on 19 June 1965 and held in detention until 1980. See Nedjib Sidi Moussa, "[In memoriam Mohammed Harbi \(1933-2026\)](#)", ESSF, January 2026.] Following the 19 June 1965 coup d'état led by Boumediene[[Houari Boumediene (1932-1978) was an Algerian military commander who served as Minister of Defence under Ben Bella before seizing power in the coup of 19 June 1965. He ruled Algeria until his death, consolidating a military-bureaucratic regime that marginalised civilian political structures.

[7] The Organisation de la Résistance populaire (ORP) was a clandestine left-wing opposition movement formed after the 1965 coup by Harbi and allies from various left currents, including former members of the Parti communiste algérien (PCA, Algerian Communist Party). It sought to resist the military takeover and defend the self-management project. See Mahmoud Rechidi, "[Tribute to Mohamed Harbi](#)", ESSF, January 2026.

[8] Harbi escaped from house arrest in 1973 with the assistance of members of the Fourth International linked to Michalis Raptis (Michel Pablo). In exile in France, he became a lecturer at the Université Paris 8 and one of the foremost historians of Algerian nationalism, publishing *Aux origines du FLN* (1975), *Le FLN, mirage et réalité* (1980), and *Les Archives de la révolution algérienne* (1981). See Benjamin Stora, "[A tribute to Mohammed Harbi \(1933-2026\)](#)", ESSF, January 2026.

[9] *Révolution africaine* was a weekly political journal of the FLN which Harbi directed in the early years of independence. He also participated in drafting the Tripoli Programme (1962) and co-led, with Michel Raptis (Pablo), the Bureau national d'animation du secteur socialiste, which promoted workers' self-management. See "[Mohammed Harbi, mémoires filmés](#)", ESSF.

[10] Following independence in 1962, Algerian workers spontaneously occupied and began managing abandoned colonial farms and factories, creating one of the largest experiments in workers' self-management in history. The March Decrees of 1963 formalised the *autogestion* (self-management) system. Harbi was a leading advocate of this project. See Mohammed Harbi, Robi Morder and Irène Paillard, *L'Autogestion en Algérie : Une autre révolution ?*, Syllepse, 2022.

[11] The solidarity networks that supported the FLN in France included diverse currents of the French left. Members of the Fourth International were particularly active: they helped produce forged documents, smuggled funds, and facilitated the publication of FLN material. Clara and Henri Benoits, members of the Fourth International working at Renault-Billancourt, created links with Algerian workers and provided direct support to the FLN. Other solidarity came from progressive Christians, dissident Communists, and the broader anti-colonial movement. See Alex de Jong, "[Michel Raptis, the struggle for Algeria and the risks of solidarity](#)", ESSF, August 2025.

[12] Harbi is drawing attention to a contradiction at the heart of the French left's relationship to the Algerian war. The Parti communiste français (PCF) voted in favour of special powers (*pouvoirs spéciaux*) for the military in Algeria in March 1956, and the war was prosecuted by a government led by the socialist Guy Mollet of the Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière (SFIO). Officially, the major left parties supported the war effort and compliance with conscription. Yet in practice, left-wing networks facilitated desertion, smuggled funds, produced forged documents, and provided material and logistical support to the FLN. Harbi's point is that Algerian nationalist claims of having received no support from the French left are inaccurate — real support existed, but it came from below, often in contradiction with the official positions of the parties concerned.