

## Opinion | A Geography Lesson for Mitterrand: Algeria is Definitely Not France

By Hannah Lyons

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*PARIS- In front of the National Assembly last Friday, French Minister of the Interior François Mitterrand affirmed that national unity will preserve French control of Algeria in the face of protests and violence. M. Mitterrand failed to acknowledge that the existence of parties like the National Liberation Front stand contrary to his claim that Algeria has ever been entirely French.*

On November 1, the Algerian National Liberation Front initiated a series of attacks against French holdings across the country, proclaiming independence for the Algerian state. The National Liberation Front (FLN) is a nationalist party in Algeria that is gaining more and more attention as it organizes hundreds of bombings, fires, and shootings that target all manifestations of French colonial rule. Demanding full Algerian independence, the FLN inspires civilians to turn to violence in pursuit of self-determination, a sentiment that echoes similar decolonization efforts in Morocco and Tunisia. In a speech last week, François Mitterrand responded to recent FLN attacks by affirming French intentions to impose political control by force, announcing the deployment of roughly 3,200 soldiers as a show of French power and voluntarism. His tone-deaf explanations of sending troops to Algeria in order to defend local populations and keep the peace speak to the French government's inability to recognize larger decolonization movements; a blind spot that seems particularly inexcusable in light of recent French concessions in Indochina.

Mitterrand opened his speech with a sentimental reflection on the deaths of five people at a FLN attack in Constantine, emphasizing the symbolic impact of the senseless loss of two young teachers, a caïd (Muslim judge), and two soldiers. He referenced the attack as a “hastily launched outburst” that robbed France of five proud citizens; portraying the French nation as a victim in the face of individual terrorism. Mitterrand, an instrument of French imperialism, would be the last to recognize that the perpetrators of the November 1 attacks are likely the real victims under continued colonial rule.

A history of violent military occupation and conquest commands contemporary manifestations of Algerian nationalism, and this legacy of French domination speaks to the deep rifts between Algeria and metropolitan France. The French arrived in Algeria in 1830 and, after legally establishing the territory as a department, they instituted a political and legal system of arbitrary French power. The implementation of large-scale disenfranchisement, taxation, and land dispossession destroyed local culture along with the sustenance farming that local Algerians depended on for survival, and both famine and political oppression continues to plague locals in the twentieth century. After serving loyally alongside the French in World War I and II, Algerians have called repetitively for independence from France. Peaceful protests have been answered with violent retribution, including mandatory curfews and police shootings.

Enter the FLN. The successor of a French-banned nationalist party entitled Étoile Nord-africaine, this group contends that violence is the best way to garner attention to the Algerian cause and drive out French colonizers. Since 1945, between 1,000 and 45,000 Algerians have been killed by French forces in retaliation for protests, riots, bombings, and shootings, and the FLN appeals to people frustrated with ongoing violence. The five fatalities resulting from the

most recent FLN attack doesn't stand even close to the death and destruction incurred over a century of French rule.

Aside from making the ironic decision to play the victim in the face of FLN attacks, Mitterrand also included some comical references to Vietnam in his address. He maintained that the decision to withdraw from Indochina was made on French terms, within a framework that France "defined, wrote down, and proclaimed." Declaring that the disintegration of French colonies in Asia was voluntary on the part of the French frankly took a lot of nerve. It was just over a year ago that the French suffered a decisive military defeat at Dien Bien Phu, which forced the French to rapidly sign the Treaty of Geneva and withdraw entirely from Asia. This was after almost a decade-long war for independence in Vietnam, as the French fought to retake the colonial stronghold it lost during the Second World War. The French didn't go to Geneva in order to negotiate a treaty that would preserve the sovereignty of the French empire, as Mitterrand contended on Friday. The French signed the treaty because they were unable to handle the military strategies of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietcong: they lost the war.

Mitterrand expanded on his ridiculous argument about the terms of the French retreat from Asia by explaining that the unity of the French people would preserve French influence in Algeria. Recycling his point that Vietnam was surrendered to protect the integrity of the homeland, he concluded that because Algeria is an extension of France the same national unity that inspired France to leave Asia would protect colonial government. Apparently, the French minister is unaware of how ironic it is to compare the bloody revolution in Algeria with that of a former colony. Why should French national unity prevail in Algeria while it did not in Vietnam, Morocco, or Tunisia? They were also once departments of the French republic. And they also mounted violence revolutions in the name of independence. Mitterrand's statements are

evidence of French inability to accept growing demands for self-determination and independence in the third world, which is incredibly significant as independence movements escalate in North Africa.

Perhaps most revealing, Mitterrand's final description of the troops he deployed to restore control in Algeria reveals French unwillingness to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Granted, Algeria stands as a sign of both French prestige and legitimacy. The North African colony, unlike Vietnam, has a population of almost half a million European settlers who undoubtedly identify more with French government than Algerian nationalists. The loss of Algeria would likely signal the end of the French colonial empire, as well as damage the political standing and public image of the French government. Mitterrand's speech communicated this idea that a free Algeria threatens the integrity of France itself, and his declaration of military action reveals that his government is willing to "defend" the territory with force if necessary.

Because Algeria is so closely tied with French identity as a colonial power, Mitterrand's appeals to national unity make sense, but by ignoring the FLN platform he exposes the very disconnect between colonial government and the Algerian people that he was trying to dispute. He claimed that French law defines Algeria, asserting that Algeria is France because deputies in each overseas territory vote in the same parliament as the metropole. Yet the French republic has never been accessible to Algerians themselves, who were only recently permitted to elect leaders who still hold less power than their counterparts in Europe. French law in Algeria is associated with more than a century of marginalization and violence, and it is this era of French law that Algerians are trying to end with attacks like those organized by the FLN. In saying that Algeria is France, Mitterrand displays a gross misunderstanding of the geographical, culture, and political borders that separate the two territories.

*Primary Source Consulted:*

Mitterrand, Francois. "Speech in Response to FLN Actions November 12, 1954." *Voices of Decolonization: A Brief History with Documents*, Bedford St. Martins, 2015.