U.S. Anti-Colonialism and Algerian Non-Alignment:

Diplomatic Relations During the Algerian War of Independence, 1954-1962

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Cold War in the Mediterranean

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To say that the U.S. meddles in other countries’ affairs appears an obvious statement in today’s global politics. The Cold War era was just as interventionist in nature for the United States, though perhaps more covertly so than most foreign relations seen today. The Cold War divided the world into two blocs--one Soviet and one American--from which to view the world. On the one hand, the US championed the cause of capitalism and democracy, while on the other, the Soviets pushed for the supremacy of Communism. Upon suspicions of Communist leanings within a country, the US would commit nothing less than a coup to dispose of those sympathizers and empower pro-American leaders; the fact that most of those leaders were despots and habitually drove their countries into ruin was not as much of a concern as their sworn enmity towards Communism. Thus began the reigns of Col. Carlos Castillo Armas in Guatemala, Suharto in Indonesia, and other leaders whose only redeeming quality was a willingness to back US interests.

Algeria during its fight for independence escaped heavy-handed intervention by the U.S., and U.S. diplomatic relations toward it reflected this exceptionalism. The U.S.
couched its foreign policy towards Algeria in anti-colonial rather than Cold War terms; it could afford to do so because the threat of communism was never imminent in the country, and because Algeria served the larger purpose of showing the world that America--not just the Soviet Union--stood for anti-imperialism and self-determination.

Algeria likewise masked its own foreign policy by invoking Non-Alignment. It maintained relations with countries based on self-interest rather than on U.S.-Soviet allegiances. Nonetheless, it still made great use of the Cold War by threatening the U.S. with capitulation to the Communist side. Both the U.S. with its anti-colonialism and Algeria with its Non-Alignment policy did not explicitly invoke the Cold War in dealing with one another, but the Cold War’s influence was predominant in the application of both sets of policies. In other words, neither side admitted that their policies towards one another were driven by the Cold War, but rather hid those intentions in different terminology during the Algerian revolution.

From its start in 1954 to its conclusion in 1962, the Algerian War was a bloody struggle for independence on the part of the Algerians and an equally desperate bid by the French to retain its dépétements. The Algerian cry for decolonization had intensified in 1918 with Wilson’s Fourteen Points and in particular his emphasis on self-determination, and many colonized Algerians began to agitate more strongly for freedom from France. Incidents that followed included the Sétil Massacre of 1945, in which as many as 45,000 Muslims were slaughtered by French troops in retaliation for anti-French attacks. Such acts of violence by and against Algerians were also accompanied by more constructive political change. The Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) was created in 1954 along with its armed branch, the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN), to fight for
independence from France. The FLN employed guerilla tactics to terrorize the pieds-noirs, the French and European colonists who were living in Algeria, and indeed set off the entire war of independence itself in 1954 with a series of attacks on French all over the country. The most famous incident in this war was the 1956 Battle of Algiers, in which the FLN called a nationwide general strike and proceeded to bomb and occupy areas of the city of Algiers. The backlash that occurred after French torture tactics that were used on Algerian prisoners during the siege were brought to light made many give pause to and question the value of the idea of fighting to keep Algeria. Eventually, though heavily criticized by the anti-independence faction, French President Charles de Gaulle conceded that a French Algeria was no longer possible and began the negotiations that would result in the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria.

The aim of this paper is to show the main trends in American and Algerian diplomatic relations towards one another during the Algerian War. The US was worried about Algerian political and military stability, but in a preventative sense. Ample evidence will be presented that Communism was not a direct threat in Algeria and therefore US policy towards Algeria was not in overt Cold War tones. Rather, the US line of anti-colonialism that developed primarily from the views of John F. Kennedy was a precautionary Cold War policy. The US openly fought against Communist infiltration in some countries but Algeria’s independence was merely to serve as an example to other Third World countries—the Cold War wasn’t being fought directly in Algeria inasmuch as in a roundabout way through anti-colonialism, with the US hoping to preempt future threats of Communism around the world. Therefore the US did not push the Cold War as openly in its dealings with Algeria, preferring instead to let anti-colonialism spread anti-
Communism.

Algeria acted in a similar way towards the US by framing its foreign policies through Non-Alignment. Being Non-Aligned, Algeria could seek diplomatic relations with any countries regardless of Cold War blocs. In reality this middle-of-the-road approach made it possible for Algeria to play the superpowers off of one another. Even though it rejected a conventional Cold War position, choosing to side with neither the U.S. or the Soviet Union, Algeria used Cold War politics to gain support from the U.S. for Algerian independence. Non-Alignment turned out to be intertwined with the Cold War after all, as the Algerians succeeded in winning over American policymakers and turning the tide of international attention in their favor.

1. Algeria as a Cold War Non-Threat

The story of Algerian Communism and Communist-inspired parties prior to the war for independence does not reveal a strong historic affinity for that ideology. The first party that advocated for Arab nationalism was the *Etoile nord-africaine* (ENA), a political organization of Maghreb workers founded in France in 1926 with the help of the *Parti communiste français* (PCF). The *Etoile* then lost the support of the PCF because of its demands for full independence of Algeria from France; the PCF of course consisted of French citizens who were loath to see a part of their country break away. In addition, the Communist stance on nationalism was that it should be sacrificed in the name of
international class war\textsuperscript{1}--this party line obviously did not sit well with many Algerians who were "less interested in...Marxist-Leninist revolutionary theory than in the specific grievances of their colonized society."\textsuperscript{2} Algerian nationalists were preoccupied with an Algerian revolution, not a world revolution, and received the disdain of the Communists for their troubles. In fact, the PCF even petitioned for legislation to suppress revolution and keep an Algérie française.\textsuperscript{3} Thus with the earliest organized conception of Algerian nationalism came an already acerbic Communist response and a corresponding break of the PCF with the Etoile in the early 1930s.\textsuperscript{4}

Communism was certainly present in Algeria proper as well, in the form of the Parti communiste algérien (PCA). The PCA was founded in 1935 but consisted mainly of colons (French and European settlers) who disapproved of Arab nationalism.\textsuperscript{5} They, just like the PCF in France, had no desire for Algerian independence and played no part in the inception of the FLN. The FLN returned the favor by not allowing the PCF to join its ranks as a bloc, though individual party members could be admitted. In July of 1956, the PCF ceased to exist at the insistence of the FLN, and its members were absorbed into the ranks of the revolutionaries.\textsuperscript{6} The clear winner was the FLN, who had succeeded in muscling out all other opposition parties. The Communists were one of those victims, and were never forgiven for their indifference and nonsupport of the Algerian war.

Communism and nationalism did not prove happy bedfellows, making it unlikely that

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid 165.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid 138.
\textsuperscript{5} Gordon 30.
\textsuperscript{6} Ruedy 165.
Algeria would ever fall into the Soviet camp. Algerian and French Communists’ long history in opposition to Algerian independence served to bolster the U.S. impression that Algeria was not susceptible to Communist infiltration and thus the U.S. was “concerned with this issue but not in an atmosphere of immediate crisis.”

American policymakers were well aware that the danger of Communism was not the most significant problem facing Algeria. National Security Council (NSC) reports on the Maghreb region from 1954-1962 highlight the main trends in U.S. security policy towards Algeria. These reports do mention the importance of preventing Communist infiltration, making the “prevention of the spread of Communist influence in the North African area” an American objectives in the Maghreb. France, however, proved consistently to be a bigger problem than the Soviets. In 1954, the U.S. opined that “the danger in this area to the security of the free world arises not from the threat of direct Soviet military attack, but from instability resulting primarily from the conflict between native nationalists and the French position[.]” Communists were not as dangerous to stability in the Maghreb as the French, who appeared ready and willing to fight as long as possible to keep Algeria. The French also made the Maghreb situation difficult for the United States, who noted that “in the event of major uprisings [in Algeria], at least the Moslem nations would find it difficult to cooperate consistently with the U.S. or any other power that supports the French position.” The U.S. sensed that supporting France could be an impediment on its political interests within the region, especially to finding a

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10 NSC 5436/1, 21.
solution to the Algerian war. Most of the NSC reports talk extensively about helping France reach a settlement with Algeria while making far less mention about Communists or Soviet interests in Algeria. Conversely, France’s military wellbeing had much to do with the strength of NATO and protecting U.S.-European interests, and indeed the Soviets had an interest in exploiting French-American differences.\textsuperscript{11} To Algeria itself, however, the Soviets paid little attention.

The Soviet policymakers, by virtue of their reluctance to support the nationalists, held little sway in Algeria. Soviet reaction to the onset of the Algerian War was nonexistent,\textsuperscript{12} no doubt because of the chilly divide between Algerian Communists and Arab nationalists (the PCA and the FLN). The Soviets had very little interest in Algeria because it “viewed the Maghreb more as an intermediate area than as a geopolitical force per se.”\textsuperscript{13} Consequently, the prevention of the spread of Communism to Algeria proposed by the NSC seems more of a customary stance than one particular to that region. The U.S. would not welcome the spread of Communism to any country, and might have included that same objective in any number of disparate NSC reports. The center of the Soviet-Arab world was Cairo,\textsuperscript{14} not Algiers, and the events in Algeria took a backseat to Soviet concerns in Europe and the Middle East. In fact, the USSR did not grant de facto recognition of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA) until 1960, two years after its founding (though it must be noted that the US did not grant the GPRA

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid 64.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid 128.
recognition either\textsuperscript{15}--its deep involvement with France, however, kept it on the Algerian radar).\textsuperscript{16} It seems quite clear that the USSR was not in any hurry to involve itself in Algeria and therefore lost any chance it had of exerting influence in that region.

The enmity between Arab nationalists and Communists, the perception by the US that Communism was not an imminent threat in Algeria, and Soviet disinterest in Algeria were the major reasons why Algeria did not constitute a direct Cold War battleground for America. There was no enemy to fight in Algeria, only the looming threat of instability brought on by French reluctance to end the war. Any foreign policy toward Algeria would thus be preventative in nature--preventing the possibility of the spread of Communism and not directly challenging the Soviets. Anti-colonialism was the perfect costume with which to dress Cold War policies.

2. Kennedy and Anti-Colonialism

When John F. Kennedy addressed the Senate about the Algerian War in 1957, he was the harbinger of a new kind of diplomacy with Algeria; Kennedy reinvoked the idea of America as an anti-colonial crusader whose mission was to ensure stability in the Third World. Communism was not a threat in Algeria itself, so any Cold War policy toward it had to come from a different angle--in Kennedy's case, this angle was anti-colonialism.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, Kennedy's predecessor, adhered to a noncommittal policy that saw the delivery of NATO arms to France as well as covert operations with the FLN

\textsuperscript{16} Zoubir 79.
by the CIA. Eisenhower could not support the Algerian cause because of the “NATO imperative,” whereby the NATO alliance with France had to be honored and protected. France was already angry with the United States for not providing adequate weaponry to fight the Algerians per its NATO obligations. They also were suspicious of Eisenhower’s middling approach, guessing correctly that the U.S. was reluctant to fully support its European ally for fear of losing influence in a future independent Algeria. Eisenhower preferred to sit on the fence and await the outcome, rather than actively force a conclusion. Any move off of that fence would have put even more strain on French-American relations. Eisenhower was roundly criticized by Kennedy for his lack of action; the then-Senator took the President to task in 1957 for forgetting the traditional anti-colonial stance of the U.S.. Eisenhower, however, refused to elevate contact with the FLN. Though he distinguished between Arab nationalism and Communism, there was no clear-cut way that Eisenhower saw to change his policies on Algeria. That task would be left to the next President, John F. Kennedy.

Kennedy’s reversion to anti-colonialist policies was a compromise for him between idealism and the unavoidable reality of Cold War politics. There was no doubt that Kennedy felt true camaraderie with the Algerians. He spoke “on numerous occasions of the common ‘revolutionary tradition’ between America and the emerging nations of Africa” and idealistically believed that anti-colonialism was a necessary response because

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17 Lefebvre 64.
19 Ibid 33.
20 Lefebvre 71.
of that common heritage. He even gave a speech in 1958 juxtaposing the US's lack of vigor in condemning Western colonialism versus its unbridled enthusiasm for attacking Soviet imperialism, hypocritical insofar as both types of aggression were simply two sides of the same coin. Tempering his idealism with reality, however, Kennedy saw anti-colonialism as a necessary weapon in the Cold War. He was at heart a Cold Warrior who used anti-colonialism as an expression of his Cold War policy. Kennedy believed in the Domino Effect and he perceived that Eisenhower had only succeeded in flaming the frustrations of the Algerians nationalists. He reasoned that if the war was allowed to go on any further, the Algerians could jump ship to the Soviet side. Since his overwhelming preoccupation was the prevention of the spread of Communism in the Third World, Kennedy had to find a way to implement his initiative. No doubt influenced by factors such as the NSC's assessment that the Algerian War was a "divisive factor in the non-Communist World especially as between the Arab and anti-colonial countries on the one hand and the colonial powers on the other," Kennedy sought to intervene in Algeria to eliminate any danger that the outcome of the war could alienate non-Communist countries from the U.S.. Because Algeria was not under direct Communist threat because of the factors stated earlier, Kennedy did not explicitly use the Cold War to address the Algerian War. Instead, he cloaked his intentions in Algeria by using anti-colonialism. The goal of this anti-colonialism, however, was not simply to win Algerian independence--the

22 Ibid 321.
23 Ibid 309.
24 Barkaoui 34.
25 NSC 5614/1 1.
larger, hidden goal was to insure that Communism did not gain a hold in North Africa or in the minds of countries that looked to Algeria as a revolutionary model. The larger, hidden goal of Kennedy was a preemptive strike at the Soviets, a precautionary measure that did have immediate Cold War consequences but rather hedged American security in the future. Kennedy’s appeals for anti-colonialism were thus driven by the Cold War despite any outwardly ideological or idealistic appearances.

Kennedy was not immune to political pressures but did succeed in effecting some real changes in Algerian diplomatic relations. As he began his run for the presidency, his tone on Algeria softened perceptibly. Far from trumpeting the Algerian cause, “he maintained almost a complete public silence on Algeria and those views which he did express reflected the Democratic Party establishment line.”26 Moreover, his public policy on Algeria upon becoming President was little different from that of Eisenhower’s.27 Kennedy continued to funnel arms to France,28 though he also tried to appease the Algerians by establishing official contact with the FLN in 1961, before the end of the war.29 Though not immediately apparent, the behind-the-scenes uproar that was caused in the executive branch by the mere suggestion (and then adoption) of anti-colonialism was an indicator that Kennedy actually did shake up the status quo. President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles were both annoyed with Kennedy for taking such an obtuse stance while he was in the Senate, and the infighting between the Africa Bureau and the

26 Lefebvre 66.
27 Ibid 68.
28 Ibid 71.
29 Barakoui 37.
European Bureau under his presidency was fierce.\textsuperscript{30} When all was said and done, Algeria gained its independence in 1962 and was recognized on July 3\textsuperscript{rd} as a sovereign nation by the United States. The methods it used to achieve its independence, coincidentally, were oftentimes just as duplicitous as the US use of anti-colonialism to cover up Cold War aims.

3. Algerian Non-Alignment and Use of Cold War Politics

The Non-Aligned Movement was officially founded in 1961 in Belgrade, but can trace its intellectual origins back to the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia. Non-Alignment meant, in essence, neutrality in the Cold War; Non-Aligned countries could retain diplomatic relations with countries regardless of any bloc allegiances, so long as those relations proved beneficial. This neutrality was also coupled with a virulently anti-colonial outlook.\textsuperscript{31} Algeria was an early participant in the formulation of the Non-Aligned ideology. It sent representatives to the Bandung Conference, and though it only had observer status, leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Zhou Enlai of China were enthusiastic supporters of Algeria's claim to independence.\textsuperscript{32} Though some would argue that Algeria did not strictly follow the Non-Aligned ideology,\textsuperscript{33} it repeatedly refused to choose sides between the U.S. and U.S.S.R and later on did become a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1960s and 1970s after independence. For the purpose of this

\textsuperscript{30}Lefebvre 72-73.
\textsuperscript{33}Ibid 65.
paper, the FLN will be referred to as Non-Aligned, in light of the trajectory of its foreign policy.

The FLN’s diplomatic relations during the Algerian War followed an overarching goal of internationalizing its independence movement. The FLN, under the guidance of Hocine Ait Ahmed, had formulated a grande stratégie that would force Algeria onto the world stage; Ah Ahmed saw no other path to victory, for France had the militaristic upper hand.34 All Algeria could do was wage a diplomatic war and hope that international sympathy and pressure on the French would compensate for the lack of Algerian firepower. The U.N. was used as a forum to lodge complaints against France and also draw support from other anti-colonial nations. Without this support and publicity, it was unlikely that Algeria could have withstood French military might. The Algerians brought many motions before the General Assembly to open discussion on the Algerian War, but the majority were not passed. They remained undeterred, and in 1960 were finally rewarded with a 52-27 vote passing a measure to organize a U.N.-led referendum of the Algerian people.35 The Algerians also waged a gritty media campaign, succeeding in garnering sympathy for the brutalities committed in the 1957 Battle of Algiers and damaging French credibility along the way. In early 1958 they also brought the French to task for the bombing of a Tunisian border village; the foreign press was deliberately called in by FLN officials within hours of the attack to document the aftermath and create problems for French public relations.36 The U.S., by virtue of its alliance in NATO with

35 Lassassi 65.
36 “Rethinking the Cold War and Decolonization” 230.
France, was both inevitably and deliberately drawn into the melee by the Algerians.

From the onset of the Algerian War, leaders of the FLN had proclaimed their neutral stances on foreign policy; they perhaps purposefully undermined their own intentions by instead using their neutrality to facilitate Algeria’s manipulation of the U.S. and U.S.S.R through Cold War politics. The original purpose of this supposed neutrality was multifold: Algerian leaders stayed out of the Cold War (or entered it selectively, as they did), established ties on an international level with fellow Non-Aligned countries, and boosted diplomatic relations as a newly sovereign country.\(^{37}\) In reality, however, the Algerians used the Cold War power struggle as much as possible to gain concessions towards its independence. This strategy seemed to be an old one: in 1946, the \textit{Parti du Peuple Algérien} (PPA), a successor to the \textit{ENA}, had already been “less interested in allying with the Americans and British than playing them off against the Soviets,”\(^{38}\) perhaps setting a precedent for matters to come.

The thought of Algeria capitulating to the Soviets was a weapon that the FLN, throughout the Algerian War, wielded against the U.S.. The U.S. was well aware of this chicanery early on in the game, noting even in 1954 that “in general, the nationalist movements resist Communist blandishments and possibly they may even intend to utilize the presence of the Communists...merely as a specter intended to frighten the United States into exacting French concessions to nationalism.”\(^{39}\) The Algerians proceeded to do exactly what the United States predicted. Though the FLN was staunchly anti-

\(^{37}\) Lassassi 178.  
\(^{39}\) NSC 5436/1 28.
Communist, it still warned the State Department that if it were to fall to the French, "red Maquis" would take over the country;\textsuperscript{40} the U.S. would understandably be reluctant to support the French if it resulted in the spread of Communism. Algerians also accepted "volunteers" from China, fanning fears that it was moving closer to an alliance with a major Communist country. Even Kennedy admitted that in the face of Chinese intervention, the State Department would have to revise its policy or force a settlement of the war.\textsuperscript{41} The Algerians had the pocket ace of neutrality, which ironically allowed them the freedom to manipulate both sides of the Cold War. Clearly Cold War considerations were a driving factor behind the mask of Non-Alignment.

It would be foolhardy to think that Algerian and US foreign relations from 1954-1962 were not based on Cold War terms, despite each party's attempts to conceal this fact. The U.S., under John F. Kennedy, adopted an anti-colonialist stance that was just as anti-Communist in nature. Kennedy was dedicated to protecting the Third World against Soviet invasion and saw in Algeria a chance to prevent the Soviets from extending their influence. Since Algeria was not directly threatened by Communism, Kennedy simply used anti-colonialism as a shield to expand his Cold War policies. The FLN was no less deceptive in its foreign policy; it managed to stay neutral while using that very neutrality to persuade others to take its side. By internationalizing the Algerian War while maintaining a stance of Non-Alignment in its foreign policy, Algeria left the United States little choice but to support Maghreb independence if only out of fear of a possible

\textsuperscript{40} "Rethinking the Cold War and Decolonization" 228.
\textsuperscript{41} Diplomatic Revolution 225.
encroachment by Communism. The disingenuous bend of both U.S. and Algerian foreign policy only serves to illustrate in hindsight the incredible reach of the Cold War; anti-colonialism and Non-Alignment merely concealed Cold War tensions and concerns and provided other names with which to describe this beast. One can only imagine how many other countries, after seemingly dissimilar diplomatic policy undergoes scrutiny with a Cold War lens, will join the ranks of Algeria as a previously unrecognized Cold War battleground.
Works Cited


