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CHIRAC IN ALGERIA

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Taking place amid the global clamor leading up to the Iraq war, French President Jacques Chirac's two-day visit to Algeria in the beginning of March 2003 passed all but unnoticed in the United States. Yet for those interested in understanding France's role in the crisis, the trip presented an unrivalled opportunity to grasp the context against which French diplomacy should be viewed. Specifically, Chirac's visit illuminated the complex interconnections between the multiple strands of French domestic and foreign policy.

The official purpose of Chirac's trip, the first state visit by a French president to the former colony since its independence in 1962, was to "recast" France's relationship with Algeria. But he was interested in far more than just Franco-Algerian relations. Chirac was also trying to woo Arabs and Muslims on both sides of the Mediterranean while promoting a specific vision of France to both domestic and international audiences. Domestically, Chirac's visit was intended to promote a vision of a modern, multicultural France that could appeal to the substantial—and restive—Arab and Muslim population of France. Internationally, the trip to Algeria presented Chirac with an opportunity to give concrete expression to his vision of an alternative world order that challenged American leadership.

Sacred Ground

The key to understanding Chirac's Algeria trip is to recognize Algeria as ground zero for French relations with Arabs, Muslims, and, indirectly, all of Francophone Africa. Algeria was the jewel of the French Empire and was, in many ways, synonymous with Empire itself. Conquering, colonizing, and holding onto Algeria implicated French national identity and French republican ideology far more than any other colonial possession. Winning the terrible 1830-1847 Algerian war was post-Napoleonic France's most audacious undertaking, and the French regarded the colony as confirmation of France's grandeur as well as its place in the van of Western civilization.

The 1954-1962 war that ended French Algeria understandably provoked an internal crisis of unrivalled proportions, for at stake was not just millions of lives and immense investments but the entire colonialist project, French national identity, and France's place in the world. Today there are over two million Algerian immigrants and their children living in France as well as

several million more former colonists and soldiers. Chirac himself claims that one out of every six Frenchmen has some family connection with Algeria.¹ Algeria has thus defined and continues to define how the French regard Arabs and Muslims. Moreover, in the eyes of Arab nationalists and other colonized peoples, Algeria has similarly stood as the paradigm of colonialism and the struggle against it. Algeria is thus the ideal stage for Chirac to pull together important aspects of his domestic and international agendas, presenting them as complementary planks of a sweeping vision that also happens to challenge American leadership in the post-September 11 world.

Domestically, Chirac's purpose in Algeria was to sell a new multiculturalist image of France that seconded the Minister of the Interior Nicholas Sarkozy's new minorities policy while continuing to seduce the "vote *beur*"—Arab voters in France—away from the Left. Part of this involved trying to exorcise the lingering bad feelings and resentment left over from the war and the traumas of decolonization, one of the important inspirations of France's extreme right party, the Front National. The party's leader Jean-Marie Le Pen is the champion of the lost cause of French Algeria.² To this end Chirac went to great lengths during his visit to call for confronting the past and honoring the memories of all parties involved.

On the first day of his trip, for instance, he laid a wreath at the monument for Algerian martyrs of independence, and he ostentatiously handed over to the Algerian president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the seal of the last Dey of Algiers, which French forces had seized in 1830. He also spoke openly of his own military service in Algeria during the war (he led an infantry platoon in 1956), visited French cemeteries, and told Algerian reporters of the emotions he felt when he recognized several names there. Chirac also took every opportunity in his speeches to "salute" France's Algerian community and to speak warmly not just about the Arab language but also Islam, "France's second religion." He brandished his Iraq policies, which had endeared him to many of France's Muslims and Arabs, and he also placed flowers at the new monument to the more than 800 victims of the December 2001 mud slides in the Bab el-Oued neighborhood of Algiers. His quick visit to that quarter soon after the disaster had won him enormous popularity among all Algerians both at home and in France. In addition to flattering France's Algerian community, Chirac pitched France as a multicultural "land of hospitality, welcome, and democracy," claiming that France promoted cultural and religious dialogue throughout the world. All of this was largely intended to win over Arab voters.³

Internationally, Chirac hoped to use his Algerian visit to sell his vision of France's role in the world and its leadership in the context of September 11. The evening before he left for Algeria,

¹ "Discours par M. Jacques Chirac devant le Parlement algérien," March 3 2003, available at http://www.elysee.fr/magazine/deplacement_etranger/sommaire.php?doc=/documents/discours/2003/03ALGE03.html

² Philippe Bernard, "Benjamin Stora, 'Il ne suffit pas d'établir des vérités pour que les mémoires cessent de saigner.'" *Le Monde*, June 30, 2002.

³ Antoine Guiral, "Chirac, du legs gaulliste au vote beur: le Président est parvenu à s'attirer les faveurs de nombreux Français d'origine algérienne." *Libération*, March 3, 2003, pp. 4-5.

Chirac spoke to Algerian television about how France “is very, very attentive” to the relationship between the West and the Arab-Muslim world and anxious to see that that relationship remain “balanced, just, and mutually respectful.”⁴ Referring to Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” thesis, he explained:

{W}e cannot accept anything that leads to confrontations, to the “clash of civilizations” or the clash of cultures or the clash of religions. This is the trap in which a certain number of fundamentalists and extremists of every nature, Muslim and non-Muslim, would like to lead us, and it is a great danger. It is therefore necessary to be conscious of it and to draw the necessary consequences. And the most important consequence to draw is the need to respect one another. No one holds an exclusive title to the truth. One must have respect, and in order to have respect, one must dialogue. That is the reason for which we place before all other preoccupations, in our relations notably with the Arab world but with others also, dialogue, dialogue respectful of others. That is the foundation of our action and our position with regard to Iraq today, with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and more generally with regard to our relations with the Arab world.⁵

To lend credence to his claim, Chirac pointed both to the Francophone summit in Beirut in October 2002 and the on-going Algerian cultural exhibits running throughout France as part of “Year of Algeria” celebration. He also spoke of the great interest in learning Arabic among French students and his commitment to facilitating intellectual and cultural exchanges between France and Algeria. According to Chirac, this was all evidence of France’s interest in “dialoguing” with the Arab world.

Another buzzword of the Algeria trip was “partnership.” Chirac had presented this concept less than two weeks earlier at the Africa-France summit in Paris—in fact, he had proclaimed “partnership” to be the heart of the summit, and in Algeria he hoped to use his application of the idea to his relations with Algiers as a show case. Chirac intended the word “partnership” to signal a new relationship between France and her former colonies as well as the rest of the developing world. On one hand, the concept is to imply a return to the Gaullist idea of close involvement in Africa and the cultivation of privileged relations. Hence the wording of the Algiers Declaration signed by Chirac and Bouteflika, which defined the “process of recasting the relationship between France and Algeria” as consisting of “the installation of privileged ties” and “an exceptional partnership whose vocation it is to be the model for cooperation in the region and international relations.”

Chirac also wanted the word “partnership” to signal an important distinction between his approach and that of De Gaulle, whose policies, which came to be denoted by the term

⁴ “Interview accordée par M. Jacques Chirac à la télévision algérienne,” March 1, 2003, available at <http://www.elysee.fr>.

⁵ Ibid.

“Françafrique,” amounted to maintaining France’s lucrative political and economic dominance over its former colonies after their independence. Worse, the recent scandals in which Elf served as a conduit for payments from African dictators to French political parties have made clear to everyone that Françafrique encouraged massive corruption and involved France in the nasty business of tolerating or even propping up brutal dictators for the sake of venal interests. In contrast, “partnership” meant real equality, “reciprocal enrichment,” shared responsibility, and French cooperation above all with indigenous African efforts at sustainable political and economic development. In this regard, Chirac made several statements at the Africa-France summit that got everyone’s attention. “The time of impunity is over,” he said in one speech. Later, at a press conference, he clarified his intent by insisting that he had reminded several African leaders that “certain methods that in the past could have been, if not tolerated, at least ignored, today could no longer be accepted.” France would no longer be an accomplice to or put up with crimes or aggression, and it would instead pursue the application of international law via regional organizations and the International Criminal Court.

At the Paris summit and then throughout the Algeria trip, Chirac held up both his intervention in the Ivory Coast and his stance on Iraq as examples of France’s approach. In a departure from France’s traditional role as the uncritical supporter of governments in Africa, Chirac made a show of his even handedness, including sharp criticism for Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo. France’s military intervention, he insisted came only at the request of the region’s international organization, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). “The time is past,” he said at a press conference in Algeria, “when a country can intervene at will, on its own.” “Today,” he continued, “a country can intervene, but under the responsibility of a regional, continental, or international organization.” Though speaking about the Ivory Coast, the message concerning Iraq was clear.

Chirac also tried to clarify his position by expressing enthusiasm for the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), a pan-African political and economic development organization launched by Bouteflika, South African President Thabo Mbeki, and Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. In Algeria, Chirac heralded NEPAD and praised Bouteflika’s leadership in it at every possible opportunity. He described it as a model of the sort of regional and international organization that France would support and champion. In particular he promised to represent NEPAD at the G-8 summit in Evian and place African development on its agenda.

Not Just Stopping By

Although Chirac’s Algeria trip had all the trappings of an ordinary state visit—the wreath-laying ceremonies, speeches, formal dinners, and staged signings of joint declarations—it functioned as the centerpiece of a set of initiatives intended to win support for France and for Chirac himself among key domestic and international audiences. Among Arabs and Muslims in France, Chirac efforts seem to have made an impression. Many newspapers in France have been reporting on how Chirac’s policies have been winning over French Arabs, making them feel more “in phase” with French policy at home and more inclined to vote for the “Arab hero” than for their erstwhile

allies on the French Left.⁶ Given the host of serious problems associated with Arab and Muslim integration in France, Chirac's success courting French Algerians is of major importance.

Algerians were also smitten, although along with enthusiastic shouts of "Chi-rac! Chi-rac!" and "No war in Iraq!," the mobs lining the streets also cried out "Vi-sas! Vi-sas!" Indeed, with Algeria's official unemployment rate now at 30%, what Algerians want most from Chirac is greater access to France and its job market. France already gives more visas to Algerians than to any other nationality, however Chirac is not about to open the doors any wider. As for the rest of the Arab world and Africa, the impression Chirac made could not help but strengthen the support that they had expressed for him during the Francophone and Africa-France summits as well as throughout the U.N. debates over Iraq.

In Algeria, Chirac was able to articulate a strong case for France's leadership in a world that would ideally be defined by equitable economic development and political balance regulated by international law and international organizations. Implicit in his arguments was criticism of American leadership, American unilateralism, and a one-sided economic relationship between the industrialized North and the under-developed South. That criticism was not the point of Chirac's endeavors in Algeria. He was not selling France to Arabs and Muslims to undermine support for the United States. Rather, his primary objective was endearing France to Arabs and Muslims, most importantly those who lived in his own country and, he hoped, would vote for his party. If this strengthened his position relative to America, so much the better.

⁶ Séquence Société, "Les Maghrébins de France se sentent en phase avec l'opinion," *Le Monde*, March 22, 2003.