

6. HOTEL du SOLEIL d'OR



THE PARADOX OF ARAB FRANCE

How the “Interior Enemy” Has Shaped Thirteen Centuries of French Civilization

By Pascal Blanchard

The history of France is deeply marked by the influence and intervention of different cultures and peoples. For almost thirteen centuries, the Arab and Near Eastern presence has been especially important. In contemporary history, this presence became acutely visible following Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt in 1798 and the conquest of Algeria in 1830, followed by the presence on French soil of Turcos—battalions of Algerian infantrymen—during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. By the end of the nineteenth century, an elaborate colonial imaginary had emerged. The universal expositions held in Paris at the time featured ethnographic exhibitions and colonial folklore reflecting the construction of anthropological discourses and a hierarchy of races.

Far away from the imagery of the universal expositions, France became a fertile crossroad of cultures for intellectuals coming from all over the Arab and Near Eastern world—from Morocco to Syria, from the Ottoman Empire to Egypt. Paris was home to diverse Arab, Levantine, Ottoman, and Egyptian newspapers, like *Le Lien Indissoluble*, founded by two leading Islamist reformers in 1884, and political and reformist movements, including the Arab Congress of 1913, a watershed moment in pan-Arab nationalism.

In Paris and the provinces, the “Orient” was omnipresent in the arts and architecture. There existed a deep fascination for distant lands that were the focus of imagining the “beyond” and the “other.” In parallel, and paradoxically, the image of “the Arab” grew more negative in public discourse, as racist terms and caricatures gained common currency. The colonial project was extremely influential, as France occupied Algeria, and acquired protectorates over Tunisia (1881) and Morocco (1912). With the arrival of the twentieth century, the era of mass immigration to France

◀ Police patrol the predominantly North African neighborhood La Goutte d’Or, Paris, Jan. 1, 1955. *Pierre Boulat/Cosmos/Redux*

began, and increased rapidly with the arrival of thousands of colonial soldiers and laborers during the First World War.

During the years of conflict, colonial authorities mobilized a vast military force in North Africa for the front in France. They also mobilized thousands of laborers to work in armament factories and agriculture, replacing those Frenchmen who had left for the army. If the war marked the first large-scale and personal encounter between French and Arab peoples, it also marked the beginning of modern xenophobia and marginalization. Yet paradoxically the popular imagination seized upon these colonial and new “modern heroes” as emblems of France’s possible triumph. At the same time, military authorities were careful to respect religious differences, and even favored Islam, helping to organize its practice and sending imams to the front. France, fighting Germany and its ally the Ottoman Empire, aspired to present itself as a guardian of Islam.

The Great War was a major turning point in the history of North African immigration not only because of the numbers, but because the encounter occurred in metropolitan France. As a result of the postwar settlement, France’s empire within the Arab World continued to grow. The Arab kingdom imagined by Napoleon III became a reality under the Third Republic’s acquisition of postwar mandates over Syria and Lebanon.

Yet within the Hexagon—metropolitan France—colonial attitudes and inequalities eventually won over any lingering sense of fraternity arising from the war or among the working class. The majority of laborers coming from Arab and Muslim lands had moved to the north’s industrial regions, where working and living conditions were often poor. They had to deal with growing hostility towards their presence. Popular language began developing offensive and racist terms like “*bicot*,” “*naze*,” “*bougnoule*,” “*gourbi*,” and “*Sidis*.”

Grandeur and Humiliation

During the interwar period, there emerged across France an entire network of immigrants and immigrant communities coming from across the Arab World, and especially Algeria. Among them were new populations coming from the Near East fleeing ethnic conflict and genocide, such as the Armenians. France was unique in the West for the number and diversity of its immigrants. Overwhelmingly these remained manual laborers who worked at the lowest levels of the pay scale without much hope of promotion and whose allowed period of stay in France was reduced by the authorities. “Bourgeois” immigrants likewise began arriving in France. Some were artists or political refugees, others came to study, work, or enrich their intellectual and athletic life. The decades of the twenties and thirties were heavily marked by xenophobia. In response, North African immigrants became politically active and began organizing their own nationalist movements.

The majority of immigrants disembarked at Marseille, where they worked at the docks or as laborers. Some continued on to the Rhône Valley, where they were employed by textile factories; Clermont-Ferrand, where Michelin headquarters sat; or farther north and east to work in the mining and steel industries. Most immigrants ended up in the capital and its surrounding areas working in heavy industries.

While some mosques had already been built, often funded by private individuals but with the support and cooperation of local and national authorities, the inauguration of the Great Mosque in Paris in 1926 marked a watershed moment. The building was presented as a tribute to World War I veterans. Despite such occasional shows of official support, the myth of the “undesirable” immigrant took root. It became conflated with stereotypes about the “*Sidi*” and the anti-colonialist “fanatic,” who were blindly driven by an unlikely combination of Islamism and Bolshevik Moscow’s revolutionary ideology. While the Rif War between Spanish colonial forces and Berber inhabitants of the Rif Mountains raged in Morocco, and military operations secured French control in Syria and Lebanon, Parisian municipal authorities created surveillance services specifically for monitoring the city’s Maghrebi populations and their political activism. The participation of North Africans in politics—within the French left and the French Communist Party, as well as within early nationalist organizations like the Étoile Nord-Africaine, founded by the Algerian revolutionary leader Ahmed Messali Hadj—rose alongside their participation in labor movements and unions.

The cultural life of these communities centered on France’s major cities and especially the capital, influencing Paris’s famous literary and arts scene. Arab artists and writers encountered avant-garde movements in the city, and began to make a name for themselves, like the Egyptian painter George Hanna Sabbagh.

Colonialism persisted, and even grew in its implications. The pomp of colonial expositions—Marseille in 1922, Strasbourg in 1924, Paris in 1931 and 1937—alongside the commemorations of Algeria’s conquest in 1930 reassured the French of their power and fed the illusion of control over docile colonial subjects. An entire colonial imaginary arose around the expositions showcasing France’s imperial power, the subjugation of “natives,” and the centrality of North Africa in the empire’s structure. The 1930 centenary celebrations in Algeria deeply marked French opinion. The festivities were conceived as modern propaganda depicting Arab colonized peoples as “loyal servers” of France. Humiliation became a prop for French grandeur. The following year, the 1931 Paris exposition brought to a culmination this wave of propaganda. Appealing to widespread exoticism, North Africa was idealized. Shows featuring “pacified Arabs” were organized for visitors—a far cry from the realities of colonial conquest and the Rif War that had ended only six years before.

On the eve of the Second World War, the first rumblings of independence movements arose. Relations between France and the Arab World became more complicated, especially after the failure of the Blum-Viollette project, which aimed to give citizenship rights to several million Algerians. The proposed law, which never made it through France's parliament, would have made a select minority of native Algerians full citizens—primarily the educated classes and veterans from the First World War. By 1939, metropolitan France had some one hundred thousand Algerian immigrants living within its borders, the majority of Kabyle origin, a Berber population from the north of Algeria.

In this same period, France began mobilizing military forces across its empire, as well as developing a plan to bring colonial laborers to work within its own borders, a program brought to a stop by the country's capitulation to Nazi Germany in June 1940. In reality, the number of colonial soldiers sent to France was far less than expected. After the defeat, these fighters were conscripted as agricultural laborers, while others were held in German-run prison camps (*Frontstalag*) established on French soil, which were later put under Vichy control.

During the war, some Algerian nationalists joined the collaboration. The Germans worked with networks of nationalist militants—who had begun organizing before the war—and exploited the disappointed hopes of Muslims. In North Africa, Germany supported anti-French and ultranationalist movements. Other North Africans and Near Easterners joined the resistance in France—notably the *Main d'Oeuvre Immigrée*, a group composed mostly of foreigners that was a wing of the communist-founded resistance group, *Francs-Tireurs et Partisans*, which was the best organized armed group within the resistance. Among them was Missak Manouchian, an Armenian poet who had spent much of his youth in Beirut, and Mohamed Lakhdar Toumi, an Algerian who later was interned by colonial authorities during the War of Independence. Tens of thousands of North African soldiers participated in France's liberation by Allied forces. A moment of bitter irony, the parade on July 14, 1945 in Paris honored North African troops only months after the massacres on May 8 in the Algerian province of Constantine, where demonstrators had explicitly demanded independence following tentative hints of France's withdrawal from Syria and Lebanon.

In the postwar years, immigration to France continued steadily, under the supervision of the National Office of Immigration. The flow of immigrants from the Arab World doubled, with the increase in students and workers needed for the country's reconstruction. During the *Trente Glorieuses*, the thirty years of rapid economic growth following the war's end, demand for workers from the Maghreb continued to rise. The law of September 20, 1947 granted partial political citizenship to all Algerians, opening the way towards massive new arrivals. French immigration policy remained

contradictory: though never officially acknowledged, there was a desire to privilege migration from the Maghreb, without allowing for true political equality.

While North African workers were marginalized or invisible to the larger public—they often lived in *bidonvilles*, shantytowns lying at the city's outskirts—the Armenian community acquired a degree of social acceptance and successfully integrated with French society. The experience of Arab and other immigrants coming from the Near East deeply diverged in this period, and was clearly linked with the situation in the colonies, which began to rapidly deteriorate following the start of the conflict in Algeria in 1954, then the independence process in Tunisia and Morocco (1956). The context of the Algerian War influenced public opinion for almost eight years. In 1958, Algerian soccer players quit France's national team, returning to Algeria to form the soccer team for the National Liberation Front. Violence from the war affected French society, with a series of attacks within the Hexagon, and the mobilization of several hundred thousand conscripts sent to fight in Algeria.

Even as the conflict in Algeria drew to a close, protests against the imposition of a curfew uniquely for French Muslims on October 17, 1961 marked another grim moment in these dark years. Acting on the orders of Paris prefect Maurice Papon, police violently suppressed demonstrations across the city. Over ten thousand Algerians were arrested, and an unknown number shot by policemen—estimates range from 50 to 300 deaths. Colonial violence had now reached across to the other side of the Mediterranean. This date—along with the bloody anniversaries of May 1 and July 14, 1953—definitively marked North African populations in France.

Despite these events, Arab culture in France continued to thrive, in poetry, art, theater, literature, and even the music of oriental cabarets. Sport was also an important space where those coming from the Maghreb could earn recognition, such as Marcel Cerdan, a world boxing champion of Algerian origin, and Larbi Ben Barek, a Moroccan footballer who played for the French national team.

March of Racism

Independence prompted the return of thousands of North Africans and political opponents, without stopping the flow of Maghrebi workers throughout the fifties. Diplomatic initiatives followed one after the other, attempting to control the surge in immigrants and organize the repatriation of populations displaced by decolonization. In France, the *pièdes-noirs* (French settler populations in Algeria) and the Harkis (loyalist Muslim Algerians who served in the French army) symbolized the end of the colonial epoch. Their rejection by French society, the political elite's disdain, and their treatment by public authorities deepened a feeling among these so-called repatriated populations of abandonment and marginalization, whatever their ethnic origin, culture, or social status.

During the wars of independence and decolonization, popular culture and the press stigmatized the figure of “the Arab.” Violent racism took hold in France during the 1960s. Yet there continued a vibrant intellectual, artistic, and cultural life that was enhanced by the emergence of new intellectuals coming from the Maghreb and Near East, such as the writers Albert Cossery, from Egypt, and Kateb Yacine, from Algeria.

The problem of *bidonvilles* also became worse from the 1950s to 1970s. The lack of housing was at the heart of the “immigrant question.” In 1966, the Nungesser law attempted to overcome the problem of informal housing and get rid of the *bidonvilles*. In reality, it would take more than a decade for the last shantytowns to be dismantled. At the same time, after the student and labor uprisings of May 1968, the debate around marginalization became more important and made room for the “immigrant’s voice” in the public discourse. Immigrant workers became active within social movements, and more visible in the country’s labor unions and economic life.

The Arab presence was increasingly diverse and noticeable in French society, which was still heavily overshadowed by the colonial legacy. Anti-Arab racism exploded during the 1970s. The *ratonnades* (physical attacks targeting North Africans) in Marseille between August and December 1973 were especially violent. Public policy, reacting to public opinion, the creation of the National Front, and the sudden hike in oil prices in 1974, turned towards both favoring family reunifications and the repatriation of Arab and Kabyle immigrants, while simultaneously stressing the importance of integrating these communities and their children. The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the rise of Islamism across the Arab World in the late 1970s changed the image of Islam in French society, which began to associate North Africans with the emergence of terrorism in Europe. Henceforth anxieties about Islamization of the country were a recurrent subject among rightwing groups, which grew rapidly in the following decade.

While racism spread across French society—becoming visible in literature and cinema—different minority communities struggled to preserve and control the memory of their own histories, such as the *pieds-noir*, the Harkis, Armenians, and, though far more marginalized than the others, North Africans and their children. The cultural expression of these communities was ever more important, and often even took on a tone of protest, like the Kabyle singer Ferhat Mehenni, or the far more widely known Dalida, who was born in Egypt. These social tensions and the rise in crimes of racism, despite the election of a leftist government in 1981, politically formed second-generation immigrants.

The social failure of the *cités*, public housing projects built in the suburbs of the country’s main cities, concentrated the new national obsessions of insecurity, violence, criminality, unemployment, and the refusal of immigrants to “integrate.” The March

for Equality and Against Racism in 1983, often called the *Marche des Beurs*, reflected the determination of a new generation of youth to draw attention to social exclusion and claim their rights, and reclaim the word “*beur*,” a slang term for people of Arab and North African descent often used in a derogatory manner. The march, which began in Marseille and ended in Paris, was peaceful, and marked a new period in relations between France and the Arab communities living within its borders. It also succeeded in drawing media and political attention, including that of President François Mitterrand. As a result, a new residency permit system, the “ten-year card,” was established. In 1984, other political and cause-oriented movements emerged, among which SOS Racisme was the most prominent. Yet the new generation’s demands remained largely unheeded, both by the political elite and media, and were not integrated into French politics. They remained on the margins. The result, twenty years later in 2005, was that their children undertook a new, more violent form of protest, spreading revolt throughout France’s poorer neighborhoods.

At the same time, immigrant communities became more fragmented on the ground, with each person living in a seemingly isolated social unit. The new generation and its desire for the recognition of its own history and identity, as well as religious pressures and urban decay, redefined immigrant society. Stereotypes about Islam further fed public fears, mistrust, and a discriminatory discourse. Arab populations were the “interior enemies” and henceforth grouped collectively as “Muslims.”

Colonial Fracture

Throughout the 1990s, the problem of the *banlieues*, the poor suburbs where many immigrants lived, obsessed public opinion. A new cultural wave grew out of the *banlieues*, famously captured in the 1995 film *La Haine*. New forms of dance, music, and theater emerged that expressed this hybrid urban culture, which was popularly represented by hip-hop. Professional sport singled itself out as a viable path towards integration; France’s hosting of and victory in the 1998 FIFA World Cup fed the myth of a “black-white-*beur*” nation. Sport was a uniquely welcoming space for youth of North African background. Nevertheless, very few *beur* icons emerged in the public space and media.

During this period, despite more restrictive policies, immigration from the Maghreb continued apace. By now, second- and third-generation immigrants lived in the country. Their permanent presence changed the situation: their children are French and will remain so. The violence of xenophobic discourses now targets them.

The economic and social crisis continued for these communities, which encouraged the stigmatization of North Africans, especially by far right groups like the National Front. Communities pushed to the edge of society, unemployment two and

half times higher than the national average, as well as insecurity and prejudice caused by fear of the “other” and Islam, created a “colonial fracture” within French society at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The early 2000s witnessed a shift in the language around Arab and Near Eastern France: Armenians asserted themselves in the political arena, especially regarding commemoration of the genocide; Turks and Kurds guarded their cultural specificity while living at the margins of society; the *pieds-noirs* and North African Jews created a space for themselves in the national memory. Syrian and Lebanese as well as Harki communities remained invisible, neither contentious nor incorporated into the national discourse. By contrast, North Africans were still the targets of racism in a country that is itself a prisoner to its own colonial past, even as personalities from immigrant backgrounds became national emblems, like Jamel Debbouze, an actor born in France to Moroccan parents; Dany Boon, a French comedian and actor whose father is Kabyle; Gad Elmaleh, a Moroccan-French standup comedian; Zinedine Zidane, a renowned French football player of Algerian Berber descent; Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, a socialist politician born in Morocco’s Rif Mountains who currently serves as French minister of education, higher education, and research; or Rachida Dati, a member of the European parliament and justice minister under President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Over the past decades, a “threatening” East has fixated the popular imagination, influenced by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the rise in jihadism. The September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States and clashes around the France-Algeria football match in the following month resuscitated the myth of the “interior enemy,” and focused it on Muslim Arabs living in the *banlieues*. That rhetoric has continued to the present day and worsened following a wave of terrorist attacks in France in 2015. However, Arabs are more present in culture, literature, and the arts, as well as the economy and politics, than ever before. The paradox deeply reflects the contradictions of contemporary French society. The anxiety behind the myth of the “interior enemy,” the “culture of rejection,” and stigmatization fed into the urban revolts of 2005. But the reaction of French society was to deny the reasons behind the rebel movement.

Caught between acceptance and rejection, Arab France has two faces: a France which embraces its shared histories, and another France which persists in rejecting a part of its population and a centuries-old heritage that has made Arabs and Near Easterners “native foreigners” in the Hexagon. Today, Islamophobia continues to rise, while the social exclusion of certain communities within France is leading towards worrying social isolation. The attacks in January and November 2015 deeply changed for the worse perceptions of a population that accounts for between 6 and 8 percent of all French citizens.

A century after the Great War, during which the colonies answered France's call for help, seventy years after the liberation of national territory by soldiers originally from North Africa, sixty years after decolonization, the condition of Arab and Near Eastern communities in France is surprising. They are a part of French society and deeply tied up with its national history, yet permanently at the nation's margins. It is the paradox of thirteen centuries of Arab France.

Translated from the French by Amir-Hussein Radjy.