



ALGERIA

Area: 919,595 square miles

Population: 45.674 million (2022 est.)

Capital: Algiers

Ethnic Groups: Arab-Amazigh (Berber), 99%; other, 1%

Languages: Arabic (official), Tamazight (official), French

Religions: Sunni Islam, 99%; Christianity and Judaism, 1%

Life Expectancy: 76.95 years

Literacy: 81.4%

Economy: Agriculture (wheat, barley, oats, grapes, citrus, olives, sheep); Industry (petroleum, natural gas, light industries, mining, electrical, petrochemical, food processing); Exports (petroleum and natural gas).

Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 27.6 (data from 2011; comp.US=41.1)

Gender Inequality Index: 0.602 (Low #140/146; comp. US=0.204 Very High)



Listening to the Earliest History

An Amazigh (Berber) proverb observes that “only the dead are silent.” The proverb encourages people to stand up and speak out and thus recognizes a key theme in the history of Algeria, Africa’s largest nation state. Even the rock art carved and inscribed thousands of years ago or the building stones from ancient Roman temples are not silent witnesses. They speak of changing environments and complex political landscapes that experienced waves of invasions, constant global engagement, as well as generations of resistance.

Algerian novelist and filmmaker Assia Djebar focused on the gender and language disparities before and after decolonization in Algeria, a country she called “a dream of sand.” The modern state extends deep into the Sahara Desert, which today covers 90 percent of the country’s land and holds the record for our planet’s hottest temperatures. Yet the rock art contradicts this static narrative by recording a wetter Sahara in engravings of elephants, giraffes, hunters, dancers, and even swimmers on the cliff walls of Tassili n’Ajjir around 11,000 years ago. Coastal inhabitants turned their attention towards the Mediterranean world, where they traded agricultural goods to the Phoenicians. The first Algerian kingdom was established by the Amazigh chieftain Massinissa, who reigned over the kingdom of Numidia from 202-148 BCE. His dynasty lasted until 106 BCE when his grandson King Jugurtha was defeated by Rome. The ancient city of Thamugadi (Timgad), now a UNESCO World Heritage site, holds the best-preserved Roman ruins in North Africa, where archaeologists have identified the intersection of indigenous and world cultures across the centuries.

As part of the Roman Empire, Numidia flourished as the “granary of Rome.” With the decline of the Roman Empire, Roman armies were withdrawn from Algeria and in the third century CE, the Donatists, a North African Christian sect that had been suppressed by the Romans, declared a short-lived independent state. Algeria was invaded by the Vandals, a Germanic tribe, in the fifth century and stayed on to establish their own kingdom before being driven out by the Emperor Justinian’s Byzantine army, whose aim was to restore the Roman Empire. This brief reconquest in 539 CE reused the stone blocks removed from the Roman city of Timgad.

Algeria’s rich resources and strategic location also made the region a target for early Islamic trade and conquest. In the seventh century the Arabs invaded North Africa, bringing with them Islam. The followers of a woman leader named Kahina, the high priestess of a group that had supposedly converted to Judaism, resisted the invaders and their religion. Eventually Imazighen submitted to Islam and Arab authority and gradually absorbed the Arabic language and culture.

When Spain captured the coastal cities of Algeria in the late 15th century, Algerians appealed to Turkish pirates for help. They succeeded with the aid of the Ottoman Empire, which supplanted Spanish control by the mid-16th century. For three centuries Algiers served as the headquarters of the Barbary pirates who preyed on Mediterranean shipping. Ostensibly to rid the Mediterranean coastline of pirates, the French occupied the city of Tangiers in 1830 and made the surrounding region a part of France in 1848. By 1880, persons of European descent numbered about 375,000, and they controlled most of the better farmland. Although the official French policy in Algeria was to encourage Muslims to adapt to European ways as preparation for full citizenship, very little was done to implement the pathway towards assimilation.

Resistance to French Imperialism

Instead, generations of resistance to French occupation intensified in the era of 20th century decolonization. Algerian soldiers fought bravely against Nazism in World War II but were shocked to learn of the massacres of 45,000 of their own countrymen in Eastern Algeria at the hands of the French when they returned home. The massacres became a catalyst for Algerian nationalism and helped empower women in the struggle. Among them was the freedom fighter Zohra Drif. The decisive Battle of Algiers (1954-1962) forged independence and Drif's memoir *Inside the Battle of Algiers* (2017) paid tribute to the influence of the education her mother provided her at home. This early awareness was an antidote against the attempts of French colonialism to erase history, religion, and nationalism. The struggle against imperialism has been kept alive by generations of mothers, sisters, aunts, wives, and daughters.

The significance of Algeria's heroic struggle reverberated across the African continent and even reached across the Diaspora with the publication of Frantz Fanon's classic *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which was inspired by the author's work in a psychiatric ward and his joining the Front de libération nationale (FLN) in 1956. Born on the Caribbean Island of Martinique, Fanon described the dehumanizing impact of the colonial experience at the hands of a "profiteering caste" that persisted even after independence. But Fanon also predicted that cultural production could become a form of political action.

Algeria Today

The French refused to allow the film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) to be shown to French audiences until 1971. The film, based on events during the Algerian War, emphasized the guerilla warfare in the liberation struggle. The women freedom fighters it showcased became role models for a new national pride. The war for independence also became a catalyst for a movement to revive the cultural and political recognition of Amazigh ancestry claimed to some extent by an overwhelming majority of the population. As a member of the League of Arab States, Algeria has been called upon to respond to Islamist movements in the region. After the fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) claimed the largest number of votes in the parliamentary elections of 1991, Algeria was plunged into a bloody civil conflict (1992-2002) that killed 200,000. Meanwhile, the once-burgeoning film industry of the 1960s entered a crisis in the late 1980s, when it was denounced as a forbidden and unholy pastime. The industry further suffered from the rise of fundamentalist views during the Civil War era, when government support was withdrawn. In the 2000s, the film scene has since been privatized and revived for a new generation for whom questions of historical erasure once again were perceived as part of the everyday political struggle for freedom and self-determination.

Further Reading and Viewing

Drif, Zohra, *Inside the Battle of Algiers: Memoir of a Woman Freedom Fighter*. Washington, DC: Just World Books, 2017.

Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 2004 [1961].

Hamouchene, Hamza, "Franz Fanon and the Algerian revolution today," *Review of African Political Economy* Blog Site (May 8, 2021) Accessed at:

<https://roape.net/2021/05/06/frantz-fanon-and-the-algerian-revolution-today/>

Pontecorvo, Gillo (director and co-writer) *The Battle of Algiers*, 120 min. film (Rizzoli, 1966).