

Algeria 1958, Albert Camus

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For those who continue to ask me what future one may hope for in Algeria, I have written this brief note, in which I tried to limit myself to a minimum of verbiage and hew as close to reality as possible.

If Arab demands as they stand today were entirely legitimate, Algeria would very likely be independent by now, with the approval of the French public. Like it or not, however, the French public continues to support the war, and even the Communists and their fellow-travelers limit themselves to Platonic protests. This is in part because Arab demands remain equivocal. This ambiguity, along with the confused responses it has provoked in successive French governments and in the country at large, explains the ambiguity of the French reaction and the omissions and uncertainties in which it has shrouded itself. If we are to devise a clear response, the first thing we must do is to be clear about what the Arab demands are.

A. What is legitimate in the Arab demands? The Arabs are right, and everyone in France knows they are right, to denounce and reject:

1. Colonialism and its abuses, which are institutional.
2. The repeated falsehood of assimilation, which has been proposed forever but never achieved. This falsehood has compromised all progress based on colonialist institutions. In particular, the rigged elections of 1948 both exposed the lie and discouraged the Arab people once and for all. Until that date, all Arabs wanted to be French. After that date, a good many of them no longer did.
3. The evident injustice of the existing division of land and distribution of (subproletarian) income. Furthermore, these injustices have been irremediably aggravated by rapid population growth.
4. Psychological suffering: many French settlers have treated Arabs with contempt or neglect, and a series of stupid measures has fostered among the Arabs a sense of humiliation that is at the center of the current tragedy.

The events of 1945 should have been a warning: instead, the pitiless repression of the people of Constantine spurred the anti-French movement. The French authorities believed that the repression had ended the rebellion. In fact, it signaled the beginning.

There is no doubt that on all these points, which basically describe the historic status of the Algerian Arabs up to 1948, Arab demands are perfectly legitimate. The injustice from which the Arab people have suffered is linked to colonialism itself, to its history and administration. The French central government has never been able to enforce French law uniformly in its colonies. Finally, there is no question that the Algerian people deserve substantial reparations, both as a means of restoring their dignity and as a matter of justice.

B. What is illegitimate in the Arab demands:

The desire to regain a life of dignity and freedom, the total loss of confidence in any political solution backed by France, and the romanticism of some very young and politically unsophisticated insurgents have led certain Algerian fighters and their leaders to demand national independence. No matter how favorable one is to Arab demands, it must be recognized that to demand national independence for Algeria is a purely emotional response to the situation. There has never been an Algerian

nation. The Jews, Turks, Greeks, Italians, and Berbers all have a claim to lead this virtual nation. At the moment, the Arabs themselves are not the only constituent of that nation. In particular, the French population is large enough, and it has been settled in the country long enough, to create a problem that has no historical precedent. The French of Algeria are themselves an indigenous population in the full sense of the word. Furthermore, a purely Arab Algeria would not be able to achieve economic independence, without which political independence is not real. French efforts in Algeria, however inadequate, have been sufficient that no other power is prepared to assume responsibility for the country at the present time. On this and related issues, I recommend the admirable book by Germaine Tillion.<sup>1</sup>

The Arabs claim to belong not to a nation<sup>2</sup> but to a spiritual or temporal Muslim empire of some sort. Spiritually, this empire exists, held together by Islam. But a no less important Christian empire also exists, and no one is proposing to bring it back into temporal history. For the time being, the Arab empire exists not historically but only in the writings of Colonel Nasser, and there is no way it can become a reality without global upheavals that would lead in short order to World War III. The Algerian demand for national independence must in part be taken as a sign of this new Arab imperialism, which Egypt, overestimating its strength, claims to lead and which Russia is using for the moment to challenge the West as part of its global strategy.

The fact that this demand is unrealistic does not mean that it cannot be appropriated for strategic purposes—quite the contrary. The Russian strategy, which is apparent from a glance at any world map, is to insist on the status quo in Europe—that is, recognition of its own colonial system—while stirring things up in the Middle East and Africa in order to encircle Europe from the south. The freedom and prosperity of the Arab peoples have little to do with Russia's aims.

Think of the decimation of the Chechens or the Tartars of Crimea, or the destruction of Arab culture in the formerly Muslim provinces of Daghestan. Russia is simply making use of these imperial dreams to serve its own ends. In any event, these nationalist and imperialist demands are responsible for what is unacceptable in the Arab rebellion, first and foremost the systematic murder of French and Arab civilians, who have been killed indiscriminately simply because they are French or friends of the French.

We are thus faced with an ambiguous demand, the source of which we can approve, along with some of its expressions, but whose excesses are completely unacceptable. The error of the French government since the beginning of the troubles has been its utter failure to make distinctions and therefore to speak clearly, which has licensed the skepticism of the Arab masses and the escalation of the conflict. The result has been to reinforce the extremist and nationalist factions on both sides.

The only chance for progress on the issue, now as in the past, is therefore to speak clearly. If the main points are these:

1. Reparations must be made to eight million Arabs who have hitherto lived under a particular form of repression.
2. Some 1,200,000 French natives of Algeria have a right to live in their homeland and cannot be left to the discretion of fanatical rebel leaders.
3. The freedom of the West depends on certain strategic interests.

Then the French government must make it clear that:

1. It is disposed to treat the Arab people of Algeria justly and free them from the colonial system.

2. It will not sacrifice any of the rights of the French of Algeria.
3. It cannot agree to any form of justice for the Arabs that would simply be a prelude to the death of France as a historical actor and an encirclement of the West that would lead to the Kadarization<sup>3</sup> of Europe and isolation of America.

One can therefore imagine a solemn declaration addressed exclusively to the Arab people and their representatives (and note that since the beginning of the troubles, no French prime minister or governor has directly addressed the Arabs), proclaiming:

1. That the era of colonialism is over. And that while France does not believe itself to be more sinful than other nations shaped and instructed by history, it does acknowledge its past and present errors and state its readiness to repair them.
2. That it nevertheless refuses to give in to violence, especially in the forms it takes today in Algeria. That it refuses in particular to serve the dream of Arab empire at its own expense, at the expense of the European people of Algeria, and, finally, at the expense of world peace.
3. That it therefore proposes a voluntary federal regime in which, under the Lauriol plan,<sup>4</sup> each Arab will obtain the privileges of a free citizen.

Of course, the difficulties will then begin. But there is little chance of their being resolved if this solemn declaration is not made first and directed, I repeat, to the Arab people by every means of transmission available to a great nation. This declaration would surely be heard by the Arab masses, today tired and disoriented, and would also reassure the majority of the French living in Algeria and thus prevent them from blindly opposing indispensable structural reforms.

We turn next to a proposal for resolving the Algerian problem.

1. Algeria 1957 (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1957).
2. The Syrian "nation," only recently emerged from the French protectorate, melted like sugar in water into Nasser's Arab republic.
3. The reference is to Janos Kadar, who led Hungary under Soviet domination from 1956 to 1988.—Trans.
4. See below.

The end