
Among the three central North African countries of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, many aspects of Algeria’s modern history remain enigmatic. Close to half a century after gaining its independence, scholars and observers continue to grapple with a host of unanswered questions. These debates concern Algeria’s tortuous colonial legacy, its violent nationalist struggle against French colonial rule, the political, social, and economic challenges and difficulties of the post-colonial era, the emergence of a popular Islamist movement in the late 1980s, and the internal turmoil the country faced as this movement was effectively repressed by the military throughout the 1990s. Contemporary Algeria’s simmering domestic unrest, with its periodic outbursts against the ruling regime is directly related to the country’s troubled recent and more distant past. All of these events left numerous casualties and lingering political problems which are still far from being settled.

The post-independence period in particular has interested many scholars, who have sought to understand Algeria’s political and economic deterioration following its independence in 1962. This descent into an abyss of social dissatisfaction contrasted with the deep sense of promise that accompanied the country’s victory in its war against France, and the economic potential of a rich oil and gas exporting state. Some studies have underscored the character and profile of Algeria’s revolutionary Front Libération Nationale (FLN), which led the anti-colonial struggle and later dominated the political scene as the country’s exclusive political party. William Quandt’s study of the FLN’s internal dynamics and disputes offers a sobering assessment of Algerian politics as an explanation of the country’s political deficits in the post-independence era.¹ Others, such as Luis Martinez, adopted a more essentialist orientation, seeking to identify an internal worldview, or imaginaire which oriented Algerian society towards extreme ideologies and violent political actions as the Islamist movement gained traction in Algerian society.² J.N.C. Hill’s comprehensive book on the role of identity in Algerian politics offers fresh perspectives on these questions, which will undoubtedly advance the discussion surrounding many of these lingering questions.

Hill focuses on identity and sociopolitical stability in his study of Algerian nation building. Indeed, this process in the Algerian case was particularly problematic, as France employed extremely harsh tactics towards the country's Muslim population, repressing their political rights during its 132 year rule, and adopting a dismissive approach towards their cultural identity. Under these circumstances, Algerian Muslims found it nearly impossible to articulate their thoughts on their own collective identity and societal orientation. The fact that Algeria was formally annexed to France (while its Muslim majority was not granted any political rights and was barred from obtaining French citizenship), and the presence of a powerful settler population which throughout the long period of French rule did everything in its power to preclude any concessions towards the Muslims, exacerbated these difficulties even further. Hill identifies these problems in his discussion of French colonial rule and its enduring legacies. He then takes these questions a step further, in analyzing Algerian nationalism and the anti-colonial struggle. Hill emphasizes that the FLN's core objective, above anything else was to dismantle the French Algerian state. It also sought to dominate the nationalist movement, and gained supremacy over competing nationalist ideological currents and leaders. Although this goal was not essential to the liberation of Algeria, he notes, it was vital to the FLN's aim of becoming the primary partner with whom the French negotiated and of exclusively governing the country once independence had been achieved. The nature of the FLN's activities during the struggle for independence had an obvious impact on its later position. Hill reminds us that the FLN was determined to gain the support of the majority of Algerian Muslims. While many of them were inspired and devoted to the movement, FLN opponents were terrorized and eliminated even as the war of independence raged on. Although the struggle against the French dominated the political discourse in Algeria, these internal disputes (which were effectively silenced and swept under the carpet during the war and its immediate aftermath) did not bode well for securing a cohesive national unity and a foundation for political stability once independence had been secured.

Hill takes this theme further and presents a comprehensive trajectory of the post-independence era. He outlines developments in Algeria during Ahmed Ben Bella's rule (1962–1965), analyzing these events through the prism of the nation building process. Hill contends that one of the main difficulties the FLN confronted in this process was its inability to unite the population behind its leadership in opposition to a foreign foe. Ben Bella attempted to work around this by creating an antagonistic “other” which included neighboring Morocco (seen as a threat to Algeria's regional position), neocolonial foreign powers,