

The army won, France lost. What can we learn from the Algerian War?



Clashes in Algiers, 1960. The army won, but France surrendered
Photo: Dominique BERRETTY/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

Uri Dromi seeks to deepen the analogies between the Algerian War and Israeli control of the territories, but it is possible that the relevant comparison is to be found elsewhere in Africa

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Shortly after the occupation, the settlement began. The government annexed and confiscated more and more lands, and these were transferred to settlers who arrived with government encouragement and out of a sense of mission and national revival. The Arab residents — the absolute majority in the area — remained without rights and at the mercy of the military government. Decades passed in this way, entire communities arose. When the local residents demanded rights, the political lobby of the settlers prevented any retreat or compromise. Demonstrations broke out and were suppressed, terrorism began to run rampant, the army responded with a heavy hand; extrajudicial executions, mass arrests and torture became commonplace. This was not enough for the settlers, who formed their own underground and launched a series of price-tag attacks that further clouded the atmosphere. The result was growing international isolation and a domestic political crisis; a new democratic president in Washington demanded immediate withdrawal from the territories.

This, in essence, is the story of France's rule in Algeria, which lasted for about 130 years. Algeria, located just south of France, was no ordinary colony: France annexed it and considered it part of the homeland; the settlers (who were called "pieds-noirs") sent representatives to the French parliament and their affairs were managed by the Ministry of the Interior, not by the ministries responsible for the colonies. "The Mediterranean divides France as the Seine divides Paris," wrote one supporter of French Algeria.

When a violent uprising against French rule broke out in 1954, no one in the government in Paris thought of retreating. The lives that a million Europeans, their fathers and grandfathers, had built for more than 100 years seemed an irreversible fact. For the French army, this was not a battle for another colony, but for France itself; hundreds of thousands of soldiers were sent to the campaign, huge sums were invested in erecting long separation fences designed to stop the flow of rebels and weapons into the country; hundreds of thousands of local residents were evacuated from their homes to prevent the rebels from hiding among them. After eight years, the army won the war and all the rebel leaders were eliminated or captured; but an exhausted France surrendered and agreed to independence. The European settlers fled overnight, leaving behind all their possessions; with them left all the Algerian Jews, who were the only locals to have been granted French citizenship.

The Algerian victory made a huge impression in the West and the Third World alike; many also saw similarities to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The screening of the film "The Battle of Algiers" by Gillo Pontecorvo was banned in Israel after the Six-Day War, which was still debating what to do with the territories it had occupied; the Film and Drama Review Board determined that it "evokes undesirable associations with the current situation in the country." The PLO was largely inspired by the Algerian FLN and tried to learn from its success. During the first intifada, Dan Shomron distributed "A Savage War for Peace," the monumental book by the British historian Alistair Horne about the Algerian War, to all the generals of the General Staff; Nahum Barnea wrote that according to the Chief of Staff's statements, one can tell which page in the book he has reached. One difference did stand out: unlike Charles de Gaulle, the French president who returned to power to end the war and survived a series of assassination attempts on his life after deciding to withdraw, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated before he could complete his plan.

The most painful lesson of all

No two historical cases are the same. The West Bank, a ten-minute drive from the Dan bloc, is not Algeria across the sea, and little Israel, with its emerging identity and unclear borders, is not like France, which survived revolutions and world wars. But when one delves deeper into the Algerian case, something is revealed in its dynamics, in the dramas that unfolded during it, in the political and moral dilemmas, and even in the language and political slogans, that resonates so strongly with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that it is almost impossible to avoid comparisons.

"Algeria is here? What Can Be Learned from the French Experience of Governing Another People," Uri Dromi's new book, seeks to bring these analogies to the forefront of the picture. The author—an editor,

journalist, navigator in the Air Force, and former director of the government press office—is responsible for a significant portion of the Hebrew bookshelf on the Algerian War: As commander of the Military Publishing House, it was Dromi who published “A Savage War for Peace” in Hebrew. He edited the Hebrew edition of “The Algerian Tragedy” by the conservative philosopher Ramond Aron and translated “A Lieutenant in Algeria,” Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber’s diary of his experiences in the war, which had a huge impact on France, and the collection of essays “The Algerian War.” The last three books were published during the Second Intifada, with the declared hope that the Algerian metaphor would help advance Israeli public debate on the question of the territories. It was not a far-fetched idea: Ariel Sharon himself delved into a “wild war for peace,” and perhaps even saw himself as a kind of de Gaulle embarking on a decisive move on the territorial issue.

Now, against the backdrop of another Israeli-Palestinian war, even more terrible than its predecessors, Dromi returns to Algeria. He does not address “Is Algeria Here?” to Israeli leaders or generals (the new generation of senior IDF commanders does not seem to be particularly interested in history anyway), but to “the hundreds of thousands who were called upon to save Israeli democracy from those who rose up to destroy it.”



Demonstration for Algerian independence, 1960 Photo: AP

In the introduction to his book, Dromi writes that “though the minds revolted mainly against the immediate threat to the democratic character of the state, and most of them did not pay attention to the more distant, more threatening danger, due to our insistence on controlling the Palestinians (however) I believe that the large public of the demonstrators... will not stop as soon as the current evil is eliminated... and will ask themselves if the time has not come to part with most of the territories.” The description of the French March of Folly is intended to encourage consideration of this question. The

book is not a chronological description of the war, but a collection of excerpts from various historical sources (some of which are being published in Hebrew for the first time), accompanied by a discussion of its various aspects: the settlers, the corruption of the French army, the media's turning a blind eye, the terror of the FLN, and more. The excerpts quoted are fascinating and Dromi adds a necessary background to them, and I still felt that without prior knowledge of the Algerian War, some readers might get lost in the tangle of details, twists, and characters.

History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes, and in "Is Algeria Here?" there are plenty of rhymes. Dromi quotes from Jacques Soustel, a former governor of Algeria and prominent supporter of French Algeria, who explains that "there has never been an Algerian state or nation," that the Arabs are invaders and immigrants to Algeria, that the French are not exploiting the country but are building and developing it, that Algeria has its own parliament and therefore should not be considered occupied territory, that the Algerian struggle is terrorism, and that the ordinary Arab is not at all interested in the struggle and only wants to live in peace — in short, the essence of all the arguments of the Israeli right to deny Palestinian nationalism.

Dromi dedicates his book to "the hundreds of thousands who were called upon to save Israeli democracy from those who rise up to destroy it." The description of the French March of Folly is supposed to encourage consideration of the question of whether the time has not come to part with most of the territories.

Another quote, from the words of military historian Jean-Charles Joffre, deals with the laundry of words invented by the French army to describe torture, extrajudicial executions, or the removal of entire villages from their places; it is impossible not to recall "exposing," "neutralizing," and other Hebrew terms of the occupation. In a passage that seems to be written about the era of "there are no innocents in Gaza," psychoanalyst Bernard Sigg seeks to examine how an entire society develops an occupying consciousness. "The phrase 'a good Arab is a dead Arab' is often said not as a refinement, but as an expression of true desire," he diagnoses.

The Algerian War ended a few years before the Israeli occupation in the Six-Day War, but even during it, Israelis and Frenchmen felt they were facing a similar challenge. In the famous meeting between de Gaulle and Ben-Gurion, the prime minister proposed an Israeli idea to the French president: to settle Algeria with "French pioneer youth, who would make Algeria and the Sahara part of France." Dromi rightly notes that this was a serious diplomatic slip on Ben-Gurion's part, since de Gaulle had already accepted the idea of an independent Algeria at that time. Meanwhile, the French generals who tried to stage a military coup in Algeria and prevent the evacuation admired the "determination of the Jews of Palestine" and hoped for military assistance from Israel after the seizure of power.

And there is also a similarity in the political and diplomatic dynamics: for example, even when there was no public majority for the idea of French Algeria, the settlers had a political lobby in parliament that took ownership of the entire issue of running the colony, intensified the oppression on the ground, and prevented any compromise intended to grant certain rights to the Muslim population. Perhaps the most painful and relevant lesson of all is the way in which France's military victories were repeatedly squandered due to political stalemate and shortsightedness. Alistair Horne wrote about one of these moments in "Savage War": "It was an unparalleled opportunity to reach a generous and sustainable settlement from a position of strength; but the Pieds-Noirs, like the Israelis (after 1967), and for rather similar reasons, missed it."

De Gaulle was right

More than two million French soldiers took part in the war in Algeria; they and the FLN committed atrocities against each other that surpass even the descriptions of October 7 and the war in Gaza. Dromi often spares his readers, but studies and memoirs about the period are littered with chilling descriptions of torture, abuse, attacks on innocent people, and executions. Both sides were repeatedly convinced that more horrific violence would “teach the enemy a lesson” and “boost the morale” of “our” population. The final deadly twist was the establishment of the OAS—an underground of settlers and military veterans that murdered Algerians and Europeans who supported the idea of independence. There is little doubt that the “Hilltop Youth” phenomenon, and its synergy with the regional units of the IDF, will give rise to a similar organization as soon as the political circumstances are not to the settlers’ liking.

In Algeria, the result of this whole orgy of blood and soil was the thwarting of any partial or moderate solution that might have allowed the settlers to remain in the independent country, as in post-apartheid South Africa, or even their more humane and orderly evacuation. The Pieds-Noirs returned as refugees to the port of Marseille, where they received a hostile welcome after infusing themselves with the French public; while independent Algeria also adopted some of the practices from which it tried to free itself and degenerated into a civil war that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands. Violence is a poison that attacks both the one who uses it and the victim—and it takes years to cleanse it from the bloodstream; even in France, the reckoning is not yet over.

Despite its bleak ending of the war, France benefited from it. De Gaulle was right: Algeria prevented France from moving forward into the future. Freed from the “Algerian question” that had paralyzed the political system, cost them billions and brought them to the brink of civil war, the French quickly replaced colonial identity with European identity. France enjoyed a decade of economic and cultural prosperity, and established itself as a leading force in the European Union project.

Is it possible to dream of such an ending for us too? Somewhat strangely, the discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian case remains limited to the introductory chapter of “Is Algeria Here?”, while all the other chapters deal only with the Algerian War and leave the drawing of comparative conclusions to the reader alone. The question “what can be learned from the experience of the French in governing another people” remains without an unequivocal answer, except for the fact that problems of this kind have no military solutions, despite all the impressive victories on the battlefield.



Perhaps The more important question concerns the conditions that allowed the end of the French occupation of Algeria, but not the end of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. The almost obvious answer is that, in the end, Algeria was a problem separate from France. Unlike the Palestinians, the FLN never had any claims on France itself, and most French people had no particular interest in Algeria, even when they sent their best men to kill and be killed for it; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a more existential dimension. It is not surprising that in the advanced stages of the war the Pieds-Noirs began to fantasize about their own independent state, under French auspices. In contrast, the Israeli settlers did not seek to separate from Israel but rather the opposite: they sought positions of power and influence in all branches of the Israeli establishment, and to obliterate the Green Line as completely as possible. In many respects, the West Bank is no longer a colony, but part of the State of Israel; under the Israeli regime today, citizens with rights stand alongside millions without rights and without protection — and the comparative literature relevant to us is not from North Africa, but from the South.

Is Algeria Here? / Uri Dromi. Aliat Hagag Books and Yedioth Books, 368 pages

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