

NORTH AFRICA REACTS TO MIDDLE EAST CRISIS. Uncomfortable parallels with Algeria's war of liberation

Francis Ghilès, Senior Associate Researcher, CIDOB



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Tens of thousands protested in Morocco and Algeria in support of Palestinians amid the Israel-Gaza war. However, king Mohammed VI is walking a tightrope as he seeks to please Moroccan public opinion, the West and Israel which is his de facto ally. In north African countries the support offered by EU leaders for Israel's assault on Gaza and their apparent lack of concern for the consequences of the decades-old Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza have reinforced a deeply conviction about the EU's double standards in the region.

No violence has, so far, marred the demonstrations to express support for the Palestinian people which have taken place across North African countries in the aftermath of the attack of Hamas against Israel. That is the case in Tunisia where President Kais Saied has kept an uncharacteristically low profile. What is happening in Morocco is of greater significance. An estimated three hundred thousand people took to the streets of the Moroccan capital Rabat on 15th October to vent their anger at Israel's policies in the West Bank and Gaza. Government policy is to allow people, marching under the banner of the *Front Marocain de Soutien a la Palestine et contre la normalisation* (FMSPCN) which regroups more than twenty political parties and trade unions, to vent their feelings and preserve at the same time the Abraham Accords which Morocco signed with Israel in 2020. In July 2023, Israel recognised Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed territory of the Western Sahara. Israel has been active in Morocco for six decades but is much more open today about the weapons and surveillance equipment it sells to the kingdom and the myriad industrial and farming projects it is involved in. Ever more Israeli tourists visit Morocco.

Morocco's relationship with Israel remains defined by the estimated 700,000 Sephardi Israelis of Moroccan descent, many of whom who retain a strong attachment to their former country. An estimated 3000 Jews live in Morocco though exact figures are difficult to confirm. King Mohamed VI's father, Hassan the Second played an important role, behind the scenes, in fostering relations between Israeli and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership in the decade before the Oslo agreement. Following the Hamas attack on October 7, the Moroccan ministry of Foreign

Affairs laconically condemned “violence against civilians whatever its source”, but he specifically condemned Israel for the bombing of the Al Maamadi hospital on 17th October. The king is walking a tightrope as he seeks to please Moroccan public opinion, the West and Israel which is his de facto ally. The Mahkzen (ruling elite) plays a sophisticated political and diplomatic balancing act which could come unstuck if Israel’s expected assault on Gaza turn out to be very bloody.

In neighbouring Algeria, historically one of the strongest supporters of the PLO, the march in favour of the Palestinians on Thursday 19th October drew smaller crowds than during the vast Hirak protest movement four years ago. A majority of the protesters were women and younger people. There were few Islamist party banners. It was officially sponsored, but many older Algerians stayed away, fearful of the police ever since the brutal crushing of the Hirak, which on some week-ends brought millions of people into the streets in favour of democracy against a regime many of them view as illegitimate.

The credibility of the EU, in its self-proclaimed role as a “normative power” and France in particular lies in tatters. This weakness is combined with a fear of rising antisemitism and Islamophobia in France.

The most suggestive analogy to current events in modern colonial history is “a pivotal and largely forgotten, episode of the Algerian war of independence, the Philippeville uprising of August 1955”, as the writer Adam Shatz states in *Vengeful pathologies*. Surrounded by French armies and fearful of losing ground to the nationalist reformists politicians led by Ferhat Abbas who favoured a negotiated settlement, the Algerian Front de Liberation National launched “a gruesome attack in and around the harbour town of Philippeville. Peasants armed with grenades, knives, clubs, axes and pitchforks killed – and in many cases disembowelled - 123 people, mostly Europeans... To the French the violence seemed unprovoked but the perpetrators believed they were avenging the killing of tens of thousands of Muslims by the French, assisted by settler militias, after the independence riots of 1945.”

The liberal French governor general, Jacques Soustelle was viewed by the settlers as an “untrustworthy Arab lover”. The campaign of repression he unleashed cost more than 10,000 Algerian lives. “By overreacting, Soustelle fell into the FLN’s trap: the army brutality drove Algerians into the arms of the rebels, just as Israel’s ferocious response is likely to strengthen Hamas at least temporarily, even among Palestinians in Gaza who resent its authoritarian rule.” Soustelle later accepted that he had “helped dig a moat through which flowed a river of blood”.

Ever since the first *intifadha*, Israeli leaders have re-read the great English language classic on the Algeria war of independence (*A savage war of peace*, Alistair Horne Viking Press 1977). The lesson of that war is that Israelis will no more extinguish Palestinian resistance by violence than the French

were able to do in Algeria seven decades ago. The major difference between the two conflicts is that Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs are stuck with each other.

In all three countries, **the ironclad support** offered by EU leaders for Israel's assault on Gaza and their apparent lack of concern for the consequences of the decades old Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza have reinforced a deeply held conviction that Europe "is a past master at double standards" as one senior Moroccan puts it. This conviction is shared by a growing number of countries in the Global South who, at Cairo's conference on the Middle East on 21 October "roundly accused [the EU] of double standards for condemning Russia's breach of humanitarian law, but not Israel's... This lack of consistency is geopolitical kryptonite".

The credibility of the EU, in its self-proclaimed role as a "normative power" and France in particular lies in tatters. This weakness is combined with a fear of rising antisemitism (the country boasts the largest Jewish community in Europe) and Islamophobia in France, where millions of citizens of Maghrebi origin live – an estimated 8% of the population. Irrespective of class, all north Africans are very worried about the possible repercussions in France.

The only French politician who finds grace in their eyes is the former prime minister Dominique de Villepin who **denounced the West's "amnesia"** in a context of **major fracture** at global level. Adam Shatz shares this analysis which insists on the "oblivion" over Palestine that led Europeans "to imagine that economic agreements and sales of weapons between Israel and its new Arab friends in the Gulf would cause the Palestinian question to disappear". He is not alone, in France, indeed in North Africa, in expressing nostalgia for the era when presidents Charles de Gaulle and Jacques Chirac had a more even-handed policy towards the Israel-Palestine conflict worthy of France's proud history.