

Policy Brief

Macron and the “Matrix of Resentments”

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The shadows of Africa's colonial history loom over the French presidential elections. Emmanuel Macron came to office claiming to be “neither of left nor right,” and hoping to fundamentally transform France’s approach to Africa, and to heal the wounds of colonialism. Given the Russian-Ukraine War, the failure of Operation Barkhane, the rise of the French right, and the general African fatigue with Françafrique, it is not clear if an overhaul of France's African policy is possible.

INTRODUCTION

The shadows of Africa's colonial history loom over the French presidential elections. As voters await the runoff on April 24, the political commentary has focused on the French president's diplomatic efforts towards Russia and Ukraine, and the electoral challenge he faces from the right and far right (from Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour). Macron was seen as trying to use diplomatic role as an intermediary between Russia and Ukraine as a way to gain electoral support, while avoiding debating his political adversaries. The French president has long held that Russia should be brought into a new security architecture developed by Europeans, and has called for the building of a common European defense policy led by a "puissance Europe." Macron has taken the initiative in dealing with Russia because France is currently president of the 27-member European Union and in light of Brexit and Angela Merkel's recent departure from office. As observers have noted, Germany's recent move to revamp her defense and energy policies has lent support to Macron's vision,¹ yet while developments on the Eastern European front matters enormously, Paris's relationship with the Sahel and the Maghreb is also shaping the electoral situation. After all, the presidential election is taking place on the ten-year anniversary of the war in Mali and the sixtieth anniversary of Algerian independence. Both conflicts hover in the background of this election, shaping the discourse around immigration, national identity, and French foreign policy.

THE NEW RIGHT:

In 2017, Macron's centrist political movement La République En Marche! handily defeated then far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, winning nearly two-thirds of the vote. As of this writing, Macron is still favored to win, but polls predict a tighter race with Le Pen, who has rebranded her Front National as the National Rally. Le Pen wants to hold a referendum on immigration and reassess the right to asylum. She also hopes to ban the hijab from being donned in public spaces. Zemmour, the hard-right candidate and son of immigrants from Algeria has gone further, calling for a ban on the hijab in public places but also proscribing Muslim first names deemed un-French. He also wants to establish a Ministry of Re-Immigration to deport 200,000 migrants to Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia each year.² Zemmour also claims that repeat criminal offenders with dual nationality should be stripped of their French citizenship. As he put it, "France does not need to welcome and keep all criminals from North Africa."

Analysts agree that Zemmour will not win the presidency. Le Pen has gained ground, benefitting from the emergence of the hard-right Zemmour, and will put up a serious challenge to Macron in the April 24 runoff. But Zemmour's alliance with Marion Maréchal, Le Pen's niece, built on opposition to "wokisme" and immigration is laying the ground for a powerful far-right social movement that may eventually outflank Le Pen's economic populist agenda.³ Both Zemmour and Maréchal evoke Renaud Camus's "great replacement" theory, which contends that a non-white migrant population is replacing France's white majority. If Le Pen is appealing to working-class voters, be they of leftist or rightist persuasion, Zemmour and Maréchal are positioning themselves first as defenders of a traditional France and laïcité (secularism). And in light of a spate of horrific terrorist attacks, this xenophobic take on

1. <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-upended-germany>

2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59900131>

3. <https://theconversation.com/le-wokisme-ou-limport-des-paniques-morales-172803>

laïcité has drawn voters and intellectuals from across the political spectrum. As sociologist Eric Fassin recently observed, many “who were supposed to be on the left decided that fighting for the republic, for laïcité, goes beyond right and left.”⁴ If many leftists have come to see the discourse of secularism as a way to counter Islamic extremism, whereas the right uses laïcité to delegitimize Islam. Zemmour has gained support for praising France’s Christian tradition and calling to restrict expressions of Islam in the public sphere. LePen, in turn, has lost support in saying that laïcité means that neither Islam nor Christianity should be in the public space. On immigration, France’s right-leaning candidates have also praised central European states (like Orban’s Hungary) that have refused to abide by the European Union’s court rulings on asylum and immigration. (Currently, European Union law for asylum is supposed to take precedence over national law.)

ISLAM ON THE BALLOT:

Macron’s rhetoric on Islamic extremism has evolved over the years. Following the Bataclan terrorist attacks of November 2015, Macron, then serving as François Hollande’s minister of finance angered many when he stated, “We bear a share of responsibility, because this totalitarianism feeds on distrust,” as he called to “change this society, by opening it up.” However after the attack of October 2019, Macron shifted his discourse, stating that the French nation needed to unite against the “Islamist Hydra” and sought to bolster the 1905 secularism law to counter “political Islam.”⁵ Macron has since introduced various measures to counter Islamist separatism with the government now supervising school curricula, funding for mosques, and training Imams. In October 2020, the French president gave a speech declaring Islam a religion “in crisis” all over the world and unveiled a plan to defend France’s secular values. As critics have noted, such a conception of “political Islam” risks viewing any narrative that evokes Islamic vocabulary as being one of those “killer ideologies,” and lumps jihadist groups like ISIS with political parties like Ennahda, the erstwhile ruling party of Tunisia.⁶

Macron campaigned in 2017, claiming to be “neither of left nor right.” Once elected, he swerved to the right in terms of economic policy (doing away with the wealth tax, cutting housing allowances and pensions for retirees, weakening labor unions), but also on immigration. In September 2021, the Macron government drastically reduced the number of visas granted to Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians, claiming that the North African states refuse to repatriate their undocumented nationals from France.⁷ The migration of Algerian workers to France is part of France’s colonial entanglement with Algeria. As one historian recently observed, when Algeria gained independence in 1962, it was no longer part of France, but it remained part of the European Economic Community (per the 1957 Treaty of Rome, whereby French officials had brought Algeria into the EEC).⁸ At independence, Ben Bella would prolong this relationship with Brussels, hoping that the EEC’s tariff rates and development funds would benefit Algeria. European states would subsequently recruit labor from Algeria as part of this EEC treaty. In 1976, the EEC-Algerian

4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/magazine/new-french-right.html>

5. <https://www.lejdd.fr/Politique/laicite-et-islam-politique-macron-remet-la-revision-de-la-loi-de-1905-sur-la-table-3895154>

6. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/opinion-fr/lhydre-islamiste-et-le-virage-securitaire-et-electoraliste-emmanuel-macron>

7. https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/09/28/la-france-durcit-drastiquement-l-octroi-de-visas-aux-algeriens-marocains-et-tunisiens_6096278_823448.html

8. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/08/france-presidential-election-algeria-history-colonialism-europe-eeec-africa/>

Cooperation Agreement was signed to offer financial support for building infrastructure and support in training local entrepreneurs.

“MEMORY TRANSFER”

On March 19, at the Elysée Palace, Macron hosted a commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Evian agreements signed between France and Algeria, on March 18, 1962. He declared this an attempt to “reconcile the memories” of the Algerian war, and to move beyond the “matrix of resentments.”⁹ As part of this effort at reconciliation, Macron has allowed for greater access to archives related to the war and recognized crimes committed by the French police and the French military. His political rivals have not supported this conciliatory step. Marine Le Pen declared that memories will not be reconciled, “by scourging ourselves in front of Algeria.” Zemmour, in turn, has described the rise of Muslim immigration in France as “the second episode of the Algerian War;” more recently, at a political rally, he stated that he wanted to put an end “to this repentance” over Algeria. The far-right candidate has long argued that there is no French colonial guilt, for Paris brought infrastructure, hospitals, and oil wells to its North African colonies.

Memories of the Algerian War suffuse the current political debate. Historian Benjamin Stora, who Macron commissioned to produce a report on Algeria, has spoken of the “memory transfer” that took place from colonial Algeria to contemporary France. Historian Sylvie Thénault of the CNRS has underscored the colonial roots of ‘replacement theory,’ showing how “behind the support for the great replacement idea, there is this past of French Algeria,” noting the “legacy of this French minority in Algeria, for whom the Algerian population growth was a threat.”¹⁰ Worth noting also that the National Front began as a movement opposed to the end of French Algeria – and its founder Jean-Marie Le Pen was a paratrooper in the war, accused of torturing prisoners. There is opposition to Macron’s attempts at reconciliation even within his cabinet. Prime Minister Jean Castex, whose father was in the Algerian war, has argued that self-blame over colonialism undermines national unity, and sets back the struggle against political Islam. Macron’s education minister Jean-Michel Blanquer, a son of a prominent *piets-noirs* leader, has opposed “post-colonial studies” on similar grounds.¹¹

Michael has softened his tone on Muslim migration in recent months, as he appeals to Muslim voters. In February, he held a two-day conference in Marseille called a “Forum of Mediterranean worlds” on challenges facing Mediterranean states. Envisioning Marseilles as the Mediterranean capital, the French president declared: “We have to help our allies on the other side of the Mediterranean to succeed, and that is the reason I want to form a special fund for supporting entrepreneurs who want to invest in North Africa.” Analysts saw this gathering as a move to court the “Muslim vote.” In 2017, voter turnout among French Muslims was an impressive 62%, and 90% (2.1 million) voted for Macron.¹² Critics warn that the French president may be softening his tone now but could swerve right on immigration and Islam following the election.

9. <https://www.france24.com/fr/france/20220319-accords-d-%C3%A9vian-60-ans-apr%C3%A8s-la-france-comm%C3%A9more-la-fin-de-la-guerre-d-alg%C3%A9rie>

10. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/19/world/europe/france-algeria-macron-election-far-right.html>

11. https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/le-choix-franceinfo/polemique-sur-l-islamo-gauchisme-pourquoi-les-etudes-post-coloniales-font-elles-debat_4292349.html

12. <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/.premium.HIGHLIGHT.MAGAZINE-macron-needs-young-muslim-voters-to-get-re-elected-and-he-knows-it-1.10709353>

“AFRICAN WATERLOO”

In late February of this year, the Brussels-based Politico Europe magazine published an article with the headline “Macron’s African Waterloo.” On April 6, a few days before the election, Le Monde ran an extended piece analyzing Macron’s “political and military failure” in the Sahel, stating that the French president had hoped to fundamentally transform France’s approach to Africa, to heal the wounds surrounding Algeria, Rwanda and colonialism more broadly.¹³ But France’s retreat from the Sahel has cast a pall over that effort, over the election, and Macron’s plans for a collective European defense policy.

A decade ago, in March 2012, a group of Touareg rebels called the MNLA (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad) began attacking bases and towns in northern Mali, overpowering Malian state forces and conquering Gao, a northeastern city on the Niger River. The MNLA would declare Gao, the capital of the independent Amazigh state of Azawad. In March 2012, Malian military officers, displeased by the government’s failure to contain the Touareg rebellion, launched a coup overthrowing the democratically elected government of Amadou Toumani Touré. In May 2012, the MNLA was ejected from the city of Gao, but various jihadist groups, including the Ansar el-Din (Movement of the Defenders of the Faith – MDF) and AQIM (Al Qaida in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb) began taking ground in northern Mali. Before 2012, Mali was considered a relatively stable democratic state, yet the spreading conflict and subsequent coups would put a dent in that image. Various international missions would be launched in Mali, including the United Nations-led MINUSMA and the European Union’s EUTM aiming to stabilize northern Mali. Additional coups took place in 2020 and 2021, and political violence has now spread to other parts of Mali, and areas bordering Mauritania, Cote d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso. The conflict is ongoing, and the 2015 peace agreement signed in Algiers has yet to be implemented.¹⁴ Just this month, Human Rights Watch reported that Mali’s army, with support from Russian mercenaries, had killed 300 civilians.¹⁵

François Hollande deployed troops to Mali in January 2013 in what was called Operation Serval, later renamed Operation Barkhane. Relations between France and Mali steadily deteriorated with Bamako accusing the former colonial power of meddling in its internal affairs. Things got worse after the second coup in May 2021, when the French ambassador described the ruling junta as illegitimate, with tensions rising again in October 2021 when French troops prevented the Malian army from entering the city of Kidal (for fear of reprisals from the local population). In February 2022, France withdrew its troops from Mali.¹⁶

“GOVERNANCE TALK”

Operation Barkhane failed for various reasons. For all the talk of state-building and the need for a “civilian surge,” the French effort revolved around military strategy. French forces were unable to persuade local state officials to adopt new policies, and local state elites lacked the resources to invest in peripheral regions. Ironically, as some analysts have

13. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/04/05/election-presidentielle-2022-le-sahel-echec-politique-et-militaire-pour-emmanuel-macron_6120602_3212.html

14. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/west-africa/2022-03-10/macrons-mess-sahel>

15. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers>

16. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/1/mali-france-timeline-mounting-tensions>

observed, Operation Barkhane worsened the problem of low capacity and unaccountability. It protected a ruling elite from anti-state insurgencies.¹⁷ Moreover, French policymakers tend to view the jihadist organizations in northern Mali simply as terrorist groups, ignoring that these entities serve as “the focal point of rural anti-state insurgencies.” Said groups often recruit young members because they offer protection from abusive state security forces; their appeal is also connected to local conflicts over land grazing rights and customary authority.

Given recent coups and democratic reversals in West Africa, much has been said about the security void left by France’s withdrawal, and the supposed “crisis of governance” is spreading across the Sahel. Yet as political scientist Alex Thurston has pointed out, the governance talk coming from international organizations and foreign diplomats is often hollow and self-serving. Better governance would require more financial support to pay for greater administrative capacity: “whereas there are 89 civil servants per 1,000 inhabitants in France, in Burkina Faso the number of civil servants per 1,000 inhabitants is just 8, in Mali it is 6, and in Niger, 3.”¹⁸ It’s unclear who will pay to train and hire thousands of more civil servants in the Sahel. Moreover, thirty years after structural adjustment was first instituted, and despite multiple critiques, the expert discourse surrounding African development and capacity-building still prescribes austerity and retrenchment. An IMF report on Mali, from March 2021, decried the transitional government’s decision to raise Malian teachers’ salaries and expand public sector hiring (even though unemployment is a source of resentment and unrest across the region).¹⁹ The governance specialists also rarely outline what kind of state should be created in the Sahel – an East Asian-style developmental state or an inclusionary state like Botswana.

How will France redeploy its power in Africa after the failure of Operation Barkhane? It appears Niger and Cote d’Ivoire may welcome French forces. Paris, by several accounts is also considering moving beyond its French speaking backyard and expanding into other parts of the continent. French foreign policy elites are also warning of the militarization of French policy.²⁰ As Rémy Rioux, the head of the French Development Agency (AFD) recently told *Le Monde*, “since Jacques Chirac development has been sacrificed for the benefit of defense and diplomacy.” France’s Africa policy is still bound up with colonial memories and legacies. Even if Macron wins re-election, it is unclear how he can undertake a significant overhaul, given French corporate and strategic interests, and African fatigue with *Françafrique*.²¹ As the Cameroonian intellectual Achille Mbembe recently observed, for all the talk of transforming French policy “Macron also has a very conservative attitude in the management of the French military presence. Africa remains a laboratory for the experimentation of weapons, training, and war techniques for the army.”²² It remains to be seen how the election will affect France’s policy towards Africa.

17. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/why-france-failed-in-mali/>

18. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/hollowness-governance-talk-and-about-sahel-30026>

19. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2021/03/30/Mali-Second-and-Third-Reviews-Under-the-Extended-Credit-Facility-Arrangement-50313>

20. https://www.liberation.fr/international/afrique/entre-securite-et-developpement-macron-cherche-le-chainon-manquant-au-sahel-20210216_VWLCNKTIBAOVPNAV3TMS5DWI/?redirected=1

21. https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA620328980&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&iissn=12248746&p=AON-E&sw=w&userGroupName=nysl_oweb&isGeoAuthType=true

22. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2022/04/05/election-presidentielle-2022-le-sahel-echec-politique-et-militaire-pour-emmanuel-macron_6120602_3212.html

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Hisham Aidi focuses on cultural globalization and the political economy of race and social movements. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and at the Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of *Redeploying the State* (Palgrave, 2008) a comparative study of neo-liberalism and labor movements in Latin America; and co-editor, with Manning Marable, of *Black Routes to Islam* (Palgrave, 2009). In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's Encarta Africana project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for *Africana*, *The New African* and *ColorLines*. More recently, his work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society*. Aidi is the author most recently of *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course *Conceptual Foundations of International Politics* and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

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