Chirac promotes French interests in Algeria

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Under conditions of rising tensions between Europe and America, and shortly after a Franco-African summit designed to increase French influence in Africa, French President Jacques Chirac undertook an official state visit to Algeria on March 2-5. France is Algeria's largest trading partner, and trade links between the two countries are growing rapidly, but French investments in Algeria are quite limited: barely 500 million euros. This stems partly from the often poor relations between Algeria and its former colonial master, which have in the past taken the form of terrorist attacks on France, and partly from competition from other Western countries.

The French daily *Libération* noted that "the net effect of the [French] crises with Algeria has been to decrease [French] influence, not only compared to Washington, but also to Rome and Madrid." A French foreign affairs official added, "Since Abdelaziz Bouteflika's visit in 2000, cooperation has gradually returned with the reopening of certain cultural centers, of economic exchanges and of political contacts. This is what we must consolidate."

The composition of Chirac's travel party indicated that his visit was designed to facilitate French investment in and influence over Algeria's soon to be privatized industries, especially its petrochemical resources. It included Thierry Desmarets (CEO of the major Franco-Belgian oil firm TotalFinaElf), Pierre Gadonneix (CEO of Gaz de France, the French natural gas firm), Yves-Thibault de Silguy (head of the Medef employers federation's Algeria Committee) and Pierre Desmarets (CEO of Michelin).

French officials are calculating that Chirac's stand against the US war drive at the UN will give him enough prestige in North Africa to expand French influence there. He was greeted by crowds in Algiers and Oran—a process involving "careful staging," according to the French daily *Le Monde*—and French flags on which was inscribed the slogan "right to veto," a reference to France's ability to veto US or UK war resolutions submitted to the UN Security Council.

Throughout Chirac's Algerian visit, French newspapers spoke of the "triumphal" reception Algerians were giving Chirac, though some admitted that curiosity and the demand for more entry visas into France, which Chirac refused, motivated a good portion of the crowd.

Chirac reportedly pushed the idea of building an all-North Africa economic union, which would require settling the disagreement between Algeria and Morocco over the Western Sahara (Morocco claims it, but the Algerian army has funded and supported the Polisario independence movement there). Such plans previously included pulling the North African nations further into Europe's orbit by granting them associate membership in the European Union.

At the Franco-African summit, Chirac held out the carrot of allowing African countries more access to France's highly protected agricultural markets. Thousands of pages of documents leaked to the Polaris Institute of Canada reveal the true nature of French and European Union interests in Africa. The documents detail the EU's demands being put forward in the current World Trade Organization (WTO) round of negotiations.

In return for limited increases in access to European agricultural markets, the EU is demanding the removal of all local laws and regulations—listed in detail—that restrict corporations buying up state-owned facilities and taking the profits out of the country. As well as obvious targets such as Algerian gas and oil, the EU is demanding the selling off of essential services including water provision, transport, energy and telecommunications.

Before Chirac's visit, and during a two-day general strike called by Algerian trade unions against proposed privatization measures, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was attempting to drum up business in the United States. Under the title “A Friend in Algeria” in the far-right US daily, the *Washington Times*, Bouteflika proclaimed his intention to forge ahead with the privatization policy, writing, “[W]e are also implementing a series of reforms in the civil service, the judiciary, and our educational system—all within the framework of a competitive market economy. Algeria has reached the point of no return in the reform process.”

Bouteflika said everything he could to make Algeria attractive to investors thinking of buying stock in the privatized companies. He lauded its “industrious people,” praised its repressive treatment of the Kabyle population and its violent struggle against Islamic fundamentalists as “eradicating terrorism,” and called his installation by the military—in the rigged election of 1999 in which all other candidates withdrew shortly before polling—“moving forward toward a genuine multiparty democracy.”

Dangling Algeria’s petrochemical wealth before Washington’s eyes, Bouteflika said: “We soon will be producing the energy equivalent of 5 million barrels per day of natural gas and oil. That makes us the largest African producer of petroleum, and has the potential of providing the United States with added energy security.”

Despite Algeria’s extensive natural wealth, the Algerian people live under tragic social conditions. The official unemployment rate is 30 percent, although unofficial estimates are higher, and unemployment is particularly widespread among youth. Nearly 50 percent of the population live under the official poverty line. Average wages are 220 euros per month, but one third of the population lives on 86 euros per month or less.