

French president promotes corporate interests, Mali war in Algeria visit

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On December 19-20, French President François Hollande made a 36-hour visit to Algeria, to expand military and trade ties between France and its former colony.

Franco-Algerian relations are an explosive issue in both countries. France ruled Algeria from 1830 to 1962, fighting a brutal eight-year war from 1954 to 1962 that claimed over a half million lives in a failed attempt to maintain its rule in Algeria. The two countries are still closely tied, however: 560,000 Algerians live in France, together with millions of those of Algerian origin, and over 1 million former French colonists in Algeria who fled to France after 1962.

Hollande bluntly declared upon his arrival that there would be no “repentance or excuses” for French colonial rule in Algeria.

In a speech yesterday to the Algerian parliament, Hollande blandly acknowledged that the 1945 Sétif massacre of an Algerian revolt by French troops and warships had occurred. However, he made only one fleeting reference to torture and did not refer to its use during the 1954-1962 Algerian war. He called for “cooperation” between France and Algeria on historical research into the Algerian war and made vague proposals to “better greet” Algerians seeking visas to visit France.

Hollande’s position was a cynical about-face from positions he advanced before running for the presidency, when he claimed that France owed “excuses” to Algeria. In part, Hollande’s about-face reflects the fact that the Socialist Party (PS) is deeply implicated in French imperialism’s crimes in Algeria. Hollande entered into political life as an aide of PS President François Mitterrand, who, as a minister in the social-democratic government of Premier Guy Mollet, helped oversee death sentences handed down to

Algerian independence fighters by French forces.

If Hollande cannot apologize for France’s 132-year oppression of the Algerian people, this is above all because his current overtures to Algiers are also part of a murderous imperialist policy. After playing a leading role in pushing for NATO’s bloody 2011 war in neighboring Libya and the current US-led proxy war in Syria—also a former French colony—Paris is seeking to carry out a neo-colonial restructuring of its relations with Algeria as well. In this, plans to invade Mali, yet another former French colony, play a central role.

For its part, Algiers has signaled that it is considering closer relations with France. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s advisers told *Le Monde* that Bouteflika “really has the will” to achieve “an image of concord” with Paris.

A former executive of Algeria’s national energy firm Sonatrach, Mourad Preure, made similar points in an interview with *L’Humanité*, the Stalinist French Communist Party’s (PCF) daily. Calling for closer ties between Sonatrach and French energy firms, he said: “Algeria wants to succeed its entry into the new economy. She can do that in the context of a partnership of a new type with France, which is looking for economic demand to restart its economy and give a new push to its corporations, which are being asphyxiated by austerity policies.”

A major exporter of energy, and particularly of natural gas, Algeria has amassed \$200 billion in foreign exchange reserves. While these funds are not used to help the impoverished Algerian working class, they offer an attractive market for corporate plunder. During his visit, Hollande traveled with a retinue of nearly 200 people, including nine ministers and 40 business executives. Algerian Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal announced multiple deals, including on defense,

industry, agriculture, culture, education, and job training programs.

Renault, whose sales are reeling amid the economic downturn in Europe and spending cuts dictated by the European Union (EU), set up a car factory in Oran to make 75,000 cars per year for the Algerian market. French energy firm Total is also bidding for a \$5 billion ethane project.

Above all, Hollande sought to develop strategic and military relations with Algiers and get its support for military intervention in Mali, Algeria's neighbor to the south. Paris is pushing for a sea change in Algerian policy, which at least publicly has been until now to oppose external intervention in the Sahel, and for Algerian participation in an imperialist-led invasion of Mali.

Mali has been targeted for intervention since this March, after Touareg nationalist militias fleeing NATO-controlled Libya and Al Qaeda-linked forces took control over large sections of northern Mali from the central government in Bamako. The US, France, and other European powers have dispatched Special Forces and air power to the region, and they are considering overseeing an invasion for which West African states, including Algeria, might provide troops.

The Algerian regime has serious reservations about participating in such an operation, bound up with the tortured history of the 1991-2002 Algerian Civil War. The war broke out after the military cancelled the 1991 elections after the first round, in which the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) led the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN). Islamist forces, including Al Qaeda-linked groups such as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), fought a decade-long war with the army.

Algiers reportedly fears that invading northern Mali could force Al Qaeda forces in Mali to flee across the porous desert border into Algeria, or encourage Al Qaeda forces in Algeria itself to mount bomb attacks in retaliation.

Nonetheless, there are rising signs of collaboration between Algiers and the imperialist powers in Mali. CIA forces are already stationed in Algiers, and according to some reports, Algerian troops are already covertly intervening in northern Mali. (See " France, US step up pressure for military intervention in Mali ")

On December 13, Bouteflika discussed terrorism in

the region, commenting that it would be "fitting for Mali to receive help from the international community to eradicate it."

Visiting in Algeria on Wednesday, Hollande said, "Algeria struggled against terrorism and it is giving us the fruits of its experience. President Bouteflika and I have convergent views on how to treat the crisis in Mali."

Yesterday the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution authorizing "for an initial period of one year" the deploying of international forces in Mali to battle Islamist forces there.



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