

Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization and the Third World Order

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Jeffrey James Byrne's monograph takes its title from an oft-cited quote by Amílcar Cabral, a leading figure in the fight against Portuguese colonial rule in Africa: 'Christians go to the Vatican, Muslims go to Mecca, revolutionaries go to Algiers'. Cabral's African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) was one of the many liberation movements supported by the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) during its own anti-colonial struggle against France (1954–62) and by the Algerian state during its first years of post-colonial rule. *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization and the Third World Order* is a fascinating account of how senior Algerian politicians – notably those in diplomatic roles and Ahmed Ben Bella, once he became head of state after independence – sought to position Algeria at the vanguard of the Third Worldist movement. In this vision, Algeria was both an intercontinental brother-in-arms and a pilot state, steering a path which simultaneously sought to avoid being subsumed into the capitalist or communist blocs and broke free from the yoke of neo-colonial domination.

Byrne's book is clearly positioned in an approach, now well established in the field, of seeing the processes of decolonization and the Cold War as enmeshed and mutually dependent. Byrne readily acknowledges both the path-breaking work of his former thesis supervisor, Odd Arne Westad (1), and Matthew Connelly's *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era*. In the latter, Connelly demonstrated the skill of the wartime FLN in playing Cold War rivals off against each other on the international stage in order to obtain what in the mid-1950s seemed like the impossible goal of national independence.(2) However, Byrne also takes this important work forward in new ways. By extending out beyond the moment of independence – a chronological cut off point in so many accounts – and placing more emphasis on South–South relations (as opposed to East–West or indeed North–South relations), Byrne argues that 'the net result of decolonization was a dramatically more state-centric world order than had been true of even the very late colonial post-World War II years' (p. 9). Byrne describes a shift in Third Worldism, away from a transnational movement which challenged the sovereignty and borders of colonial rule towards a form of 'international cooperation that legitimized and zealously defended the authority of the postcolonial state' (p. 10). Algeria, the author argues, provides the ideal case study to demonstrate this argument, and in doing so also explore what Third Worldism looked like in practice.

The book is based on an impressive collection of archival evidence, much of which has been hitherto unexploited. Particularly rich pickings can be found in Byrne's use of exchanges between President Ben Bella and the Yugoslavian ambassador to Algeria who became his confidant, Nijaz Dizdarevi?, and the reports and correspondence of the post-independence Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE) held at the Algerian National Archives. These sources feature alongside archives from the US (including the Department of State and the John F. Kennedy archives), the UN, the UK Foreign Office and a range of French army and diplomatic material.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter one, 'Method men: the praxis of anti-colonial resistance', describes the FLN as 'inspired largely by communist precedents and the writings of Lenin, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh' as well as the Irish war of independence (p. 15). On the one hand, this is widely accepted knowledge for some leading members of Algerian anti-colonial struggle – as early as 1948, one of the FLN's founders, Hocine Aït Ahmed, wrote a report on the relationship between political and armed action, drawing lessons from a series of military theorists as well as conflicts in Ireland, Yugoslavia and Indochina. On the other hand, it can also seem a rather startling statement if applied to the whole of the leadership of the FLN and its National Liberation Army (ALN), and even more so to personnel further down the hierarchy. The scholarly view of the FLN has long been that it was largely non-ideological, or an ideological mishmash, its leaders primarily focused on the goal of achieving independence during the war, and on internal power struggles and personal empire-building after the war.(3) The anti-communism of many senior figures in the FLN is well known. The post-war writing of official Algerian history has long privileged a version in which the anti-colonial struggle was more about recovering Arabity and Islam than following the path of scientific socialism. Byrne justifies his alternative interpretation by arguing that left-wing, communist-leaning ideas found their expression through 'political methodologies not ideologies' (p. 18) – i.e. Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh *et al.* provided a plan for how to structure the ALN, a blueprint for how to engage with and win over villagers, a roadmap for how to perform to the international community. The chapter is thus a refreshing riposte to skeptical, and at times cynical, dismissals of the revolutionary nature of the Algerian revolution (*al-thawra*, as it is known in Algeria). In seeking to restore left-wing revolutionary ideology to its rightful place, does Byrne tip the balance too far in the opposite direction? Perhaps. But let us hope this is a prompt to a renewal of the debate about the nature of the wartime and post-war FLN.

Chapter two, 'Our friends today: Algeria joins the Third World', explores how the FLN, or more precisely, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA), created in 1958, steadily forced international recognition for Algeria's right to exist as a sovereign state and Algerians' right to self-determination through international lobbying and delegations to international fora – at the 1955 Bandung conference, at the UN, and at the formal founding of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961, to give only a few examples. This diplomacy became all the more important as the armed struggle

inside the country was increasingly battered by the might of the French army. This is a better-known part of the story, but it is greatly enriched by Byrne skillfully leading the reader through a series of international events which shaped both Algerian diplomacy and responses to it in different parts of the world, from the Cuban Revolution which became a key point of reference, to the FLN's active support for Congolese independence leader and Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba.

Chapter three, 'Real existing Third Worldism: national development in the age of ideologies', explores one of the main arguments which Byrne makes in his introduction – that 'the convergence of the Cold War and the processes of decolonization had the effect of imbuing national identities with a functional rationale: the purpose of the nation was development' (p. 9). Algeria's leaders and foreign ministers sought to negotiate relations with a range of potential partners: the US, USSR, Yugoslavia as well as France. The key word was diversification, so that Algeria's economy would not be (over)reliant on any one partner, and especially not the old colonial power. Byrne analyzes the opportunities and obstacles that this approach represented, arguing that – at least for the first year and a half of independence – the Third Worldist strategy of playing on international rivalries to increase aid and trade worked. Algiers pushed through the March 1963 decrees which brought French-owned land under Algerian *autogestion* on the calculation that France would cede because of the pressure that they were already under for carrying out nuclear tests in the Algerian Sahara. Rivals for winning the allegiance of newly independent countries, China and the USSR were played off against each other to secure aid packages, and the USSR's desire to get a foothold for socialism in Africa overcame the frostiness which had followed the Algerian government's ban on the Algerian Communist Party (PCA) in late November 1962. For Byrne, Algeria and Yugoslavia perhaps had the most to offer each other practically and ideologically, and Algeria received tractors, mechanics, public works engineers and loans. But playing the Cold War game was also a risky strategy. The international status of Algeria just after independence was so high that Ben Bella felt confident enough to fly from his meeting with John F. Kennedy in October 1962 directly to Cuba and a celebratory encounter with his 'brother' Fidel Castro. However, the eruption of the Cuban Missile Crisis meant that the Algerian diplomatic team which followed on Ben Bella's heels to the US to seek state investment for major development projects were given a distinctly cold shoulder. In public proclamations, Algiers went on to adopt a more overtly pro-Cuban tone. Behind the scenes, senior politicians and diplomats were less belligerent and more pragmatic – they needed international aid.

Chapter four, 'The allure of globalism: continents, colors and the Cold War' discusses how Algeria sought to develop a functioning foreign policy along the lines of Third Worldist ideals. Algeria's key role in the creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in May 1963, bringing together Western-orientated states (such as Côte d'Ivoire) and revolutionary states (such as Algeria) is analyzed, as is Algeria's support – both diplomatic and military – for revolutionary groups in Angola, Cameroon, Congo-Léopoldville, Mozambique, Niger, Portuguese Guinea, South Africa, and Southwest Africa (Namibia). Byrne hints at the stirrings of discontent within Algeria's government – arguing that prioritizing African unity over Arab or Maghrebi unity 'rankled those who felt that a francophone clique was turning its back on its cultural heritage' (p. 175), despite Ben Bella's close ties with Gamal Abdel Nasser and support for the Palestinian cause. Moreover, the delicate balancing act required to leverage international rivalries became increasingly tricky from late 1963 onwards. The 1963 Sino-Soviet split could be damaging to Third Worldism as well as a source of leverage. During the October 1963 border war between Algeria and Morocco, Cuba sent tanks to Algeria, but Algeria shied away from using them. Algiers was aware of its deteriorating relationship with Washington and keen not to reinforce the US's increasingly Manichaean Cold War perspective which categorized Morocco as belonging to 'the West' and Algeria to the 'East', undermining Algerian ambitions to see itself as a bridge between different worlds.

These entangling relations and rivalries, opportunities and obstacles, continue in the final chapter, 'Mecca of impatience and anxiety: globalization and the Third World Order'. For Byrne, Algiers increasingly struggled to convince Washington that they were seeking to attenuate North/South (and especially French/Algerian) power relations rather than choose an East/West Cold War camp. Indeed, across the African continent, polarization between the two Cold War camps was in increasing evidence. The chapter concludes with the

downfall of Ben Bella – overthrown in a coup by his former ally and Minister for Defense Houari Boumediene on 19 June 1965 – not coincidentally just before the second Afro-Asian conference was due to begin in Algiers, momentarily billed as a ‘Second Bandung’. Byrne argues that timing of the coup was in order to prevent Ben Bella definitively consolidating his position as leader of the Third World. The conference, initially postponed by the coup, would never take place, as a result of Sino-Soviet rivalry. In explaining the reasons behind the coup, Byrne argues that ‘cultural and religious conservatives were getting bolder and more organized in their condemnation of, in their view, the decadent, corrupting cosmopolitanism that reigned in the capital and the atheistic influence of the president’s foreign advisers’ (p. 231). This – alongside accusations of Ben Bella building a ‘personality cult’ – is a fairly standard summary of the criticisms levelled at him by his opponents. In this sense, Byrne’s discussion of the coup does not shed any new light on the question, although this is not the main focus of the book. Indeed, Algeria’s Third Worldist ambitions did not end with Ben Bella, as Algiers’s continued support for liberation movements, Boumediene’s speeches at the UN, his Chairmanship of the OAU (1968–9), his position as General Secretary of the Non-Aligned Movement (1973–6) and the staging of the Panafrican Festival in Algiers in 1969 – vividly brought to life by William Klein’s documentary of the same name (4) – all amply demonstrate.

Mecca of Revolution is most certainly a work of international, transnational and connected history, but there is also a much more traditional historiographical approach running through it – that of biography. Byrne’s reassessment of the figure of Ben Bella, whom he was able to interview before he died in 2012, is a welcome one. Assessments of Algeria’s first president have tended to fall into two types. On the one hand, hagiographies from the time, often written by enthralled foreign journalists, impressed by a youthful, persuasive man who promised to eradicate social injustice at home and lead revolutionary struggle abroad. (5) On the other hand, popular conceptions, promoted not least by supporters of Boumediene’s coup, but also opponents to or disillusioned former believers in the post-1962 Algerian political system more broadly, paint Ben Bella as something of an international dilettante, spending too much time basking in the glorious reputation of the Algerian revolution abroad, and not enough time dealing with the country’s real problems at home. In one of the first books in English written about post-independence Algeria, David and Marina Ottoway cite Eastern bloc observers in Algiers joking that the country had socialism without socialists. (6) In *Mecca of Revolution*, however, Ben Bella is depicted as a committed socialist and Third Worldist, notably through Byrne’s use of the president’s lengthy discussions with Yugoslavian Ambassador Dizdarevi?. The reader is nevertheless left with a tantalizing question – given that one of the avowed strategies of Algerian diplomacy was to show different faces to different interlocutors, what degree of skepticism should we apply to what Ben Bella said to Dizdarevi??

This is an important book, a substantial contribution to scholarship both in terms of the archival sources which it brings to light and the framework of analysis which it sets up to be applied and tested in other cases. It will have a wide-ranging appeal to scholars and students of decolonization, the Cold War, post-colonial state-building, international relations, and of course, Algerian studies. With regards to the latter field, by chance, writing this review corresponded with two other events. Firstly, the showing on Franco-German TV channel Arte (widely available in Algeria) of a 2014 documentary which uses as a title the same quote as Byrne’s monograph: *Alger, la Mecque des révolutionnaires (1962–1974)*. (7) Using vivid archive footage of Ché Guevara, Nelson Mandela and the Black Panthers (amongst many others) during their various stays in Algeria, the documentary’s narrator tells a heady story of Algeria’s international aura and revolutionary fervor, bringing to the screen many of the events which Byrne brings to life on the page.

The release to television of the documentary coincided with a conference which I was attending at Skikda, in the east of Algeria, to mark the 61st day of the 19 May 1956 student strike, during which students were called upon to leave their desks and join the *maquis* (rural guerrilla). The keynote speaker at the conference was a *mudjahid* (a war veteran). Once the national anthem had been sung, he led a recitation of the *fatiha* (the opening verse of the Qur’an) and then recounted his own international trajectory during the war, from the Al-Zaytuna University in Tunis, one of the world’s leading centers of knowledge in Islamic civilization and theology, before continuing the campaign for Algerian independence from Baghdad. The papers which

followed, notably those given by PhD students, provided a fascinating snapshot of current historiography in Algeria: alongside a number of contributions dealing with the trajectories of local *mujahidin* (veterans), the international dimension was largely provided by papers on mid-twentieth century Algerian students who attended two of the other major centers of Islamic scholarship in the world, Al-Azhar University in Cairo and the University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, papers on the role of Toufik El-Madani and Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi in the independence struggle (both senior members of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars (*‘ulama*)) and discussion of FLN diplomatic activity in the Mashreq. The documentary *Alger, la Mecque des révolutionnaires* was given a screening at the French Cultural Centre in Algiers. The academic papers were given in Arabic at an Algerian university.

The juxtaposition of the documentary (and Byrne’s book) with the conference lays bare one of the tasks ahead for historians seeking to write a post-independence history of Algeria. There is a revolutionary, Third Worldist, socialist reading of the War of Independence and its aftermath. There is also a reading in which the Algerian Revolution was about recovering an ‘authentic’ Arabo-Islamic identity, ‘restoring’ ties to the Maghreb and Mashreq, and in which the only ‘Mecca’ for Algerians, as Muslims, would be the actual Saudi Arabian city of pilgrimage. Although these two interpretations are talking about the same revolution, their proponents rarely talk to each other about this revolution, perhaps as much for practical reasons (linguistic barriers and the hurdles and costs of visas shaping who can look at what sources) as ideological ones. To what extent do these parallel interpretative frameworks have their origins in the events they describe, or to what extent is this seemingly hermetically sealed division a post-hoc, even anachronistic imposition? Bringing these two ‘sides’ of the field together will be one of the major challenges for future scholars and students. Byrne’s *Mecca of Revolution* will be an important reference for them all, and let us hope that its translation into Arabic and French is not too far away.

Notes

1. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2005). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford, 2002). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Gilbert Meynier, *Histoire intérieure du FLN. 1954–1962* (Paris, 2002). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. William Klein, *Festival Panafricain d’Alger* (France, 1969), 1hr 50 mins. At the time of writing the documentary is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaPLGDSigzU> [2] > [accessed 1 June 2017]. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For example, Robert Merle, *Ahmed Ben Bella* (Paris, 1965). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. David Ottoway and Marina Ottaway, *Algeria: The Politics of a Socialist Revolution* (Berkeley, CA, 1970), pp. 1–2. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Mohamed Ben Slama, *Alger: La Mecque des révolutionnaires (1962–1974)* (France, 2014), 56 min. At the time of writing the documentary is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pl-kqS1AHmQ> [3] > [accessed 1 June 2017]. [Back to \(7\)](#)

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/183766> [2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaPLGDSigzU>

[3] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pl-kqS1AHmQ> [4] <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=49460>