

The Colonial Administration's Policy and the French Governors General in Land Confiscation and the Promotion of the Settler Movement and Its Impact on Algerians (1852-1870)

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Received: 14/10/2024, **Accepted:** 21/07/2025, **Publication:** 30/09/2025

Abstract:

During the colonial period, Algeria underwent significant economic exploitation, primarily centered around land issues, which became the cornerstone of various colonial settlement and exploitation projects. This exploitation intensified from 1852 to 1870, as colonial authorities sought to acquire the largest possible landholdings to serve their economy and accommodate incoming European settlers. This research paper aims to highlight the key methods and means employed to achieve this, emphasizing their Impact on the Algerian people. To clarify these points, I employed a historical recovery methodology, utilizing descriptive, analytical, and statistical tools. One of the findings indicates that the colonizers were relatively successful in altering the economic structure and dismantling the social fabric in certain regions, primarily through changes in the social composition of specific tribes and communities.

Keywords: French colonialism; Land confiscation; Settlement; Oppressive laws; Tribes

INTRODUCTION

The French colonial authorities in Algeria adopted various policies, most of which were based on violence and repression, aiming to subjugate the Algerian people, strip them of their resources, and open wide opportunities for the settler movement. Among the prominent policies, a focus was placed on the economic aspect by confiscating land, relying at times on military force and at other times on arbitrary laws and decrees. Perhaps the most notable period of intense pressure on the Algerian people was during General Bugeaud's

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rule from 1841 to 1847, marked by his use of excessive force on one hand and the enactment of various repressive laws to secure the largest possible land base to serve the settler movement and French interests. This began with state and waqf lands, then extended to the lands of tribes, clans, and major landholders, which frequently led to widespread outrage manifesting in resistances and uprisings against this policy. These measures continued until the establishment of the French Third Republic in 1870, which ushered in a new phase of oppression and exploitation.

These measures impacted the economic, social, and cultural conditions of Algerians, turning Algeria into a reservoir that absorbed the economic, social, and other crises that France experienced.

The central problem of this study revolves around the French colonial economic policy concerning land confiscation and its effects and repercussions on Algerian society between 1852 and 1870. Previous academic studies on this topic include:

- A doctoral dissertation in modern and contemporary history titled "French Land Policy in Algeria 1830-1930" by researcher Saleh Hamer, which is highly valuable due to its heavy reliance on French archives and sources and its focus on the various legal and extralegal, military and civil, administrative and judicial methods used by the colonial authorities to seize Algerian lands. However, it is criticized for overlooking the Algerians' stance and reactions to these measures and for the long timeframe the researcher adopted, spanning a century, which led to neglecting some aspects of the subject.

- A Master's thesis in modern and contemporary history titled "French Policy towards Land Ownership in Algeria 1830-1914" by researcher Issa Yazier. This thesis focused on the colonial administration's policy and the French governors' general in confiscating lands and encouraging the settler movement and its

repercussions on Algerians (1852-1870). However, it is criticized for entirely overlooking the negative impacts of these measures on Algerians and for not addressing their reactions.

To thoroughly explore the subject, I began by examining the primary measures for land confiscation and promoting the settler movement during the period of Governor General Randon (1852-1858), then under the Ministry of Algeria and the Colonies (1858-1860), and during the terms of Governor Generals Pélissier and MacMahon (1860-1870). This study concludes by highlighting the economic, social, and cultural repercussions of these policies on Algerian society.

Section One: Land Confiscation during Governor General Randon's Tenure (1852- 1858):

When Louis Napoleon was elected President of the Republic in 1848, his term was limited to four non-renewable years. As his term neared its end, he carried out a coup on December 2, 1851, declaring himself Emperor with broad powers and adopting the title Napoleon III instead of Louis Napoleon. His policies towards Algeria during this period were characterized by inconsistency, instability, and lack of commitment to a single principle or policy. Initially, he attempted to limit colonization and appease Algerians with certain decisions, but he later retreated under pressure from the colons and the military, opening the door widely to capitalist colonization by providing protection and offering lucrative incentives to large companies to encourage investment in Algeria.

To facilitate this large-scale capitalist settlement and overcome economic obstacles, customs barriers between Algeria and France were abolished in 1851. Additionally, the Bank of Algeria was established in August of that year, followed by the Algiers Stock Exchange in April 1852, with the aim of simplifying the commercial and financial dealings of settlers and maximizing land exploitation (Qunoon, pp. 151-152).

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Upon Randon's appointment as Governor General of Algeria, the French military regained its influence, and he adopted Bugeaud's policies of land confiscation, clan dismantlement, and settlement promotion. He implemented the policy of cantonnement (restriction and containment), which involved confining tribes—who collectively owned vast lands—to a portion of their lands. This allowed French authorities to seize the remaining land in exchange for recognizing full ownership of the lands retained by the tribes. The confiscated lands were then allocated to capitalists and major companies to establish settlement centers, disregarding distinctions between military and civilian areas. This policy granted settlers the right to purchase land from Algerians, even in military zones (Qunoon, p. 151).

The cantonnement policy against Algerians reveals an extortionate approach, a manipulative means of acquiring more land by pressuring tribes, confining them to specific areas, and linking their ownership recognition to relinquishing portions of their land. This approach not only enabled land acquisition for colonization but also reduced Algerian land ownership, thereby exacerbating their plight. Consequently, they were gradually compelled to relinquish their remaining lands, either through inducements from capitalist companies or through demands for documentation and additional taxes.

As a result of this policy, Randon succeeded in establishing around 56 settler villages between 1853 and 1858. He provided land, properties, loans, incentives, and guarantees to capitalist companies in exchange for building new settler villages and exploiting the land for agriculture. Over a decade, 51 medium-sized capitalist companies obtained 50,000 hectares, while European migrants acquired 250,000 hectares, raising their population in rural and interior areas to 189,000 people (Bouaziz, *Colonial Despotism and the Algerian National Movement, 1830-1954*, 2007, pp. 15-16).

Among the prominent investment companies benefiting from land exploitation rights was the Swiss company, Société Générale de Genève, established in 1853, which was granted 281,000 hectares over a decade to accommodate Swiss settlers (Saleh, 1984, p. 15). The Forestry Association also received 160,000 hectares of forest land for 90 years, though it later sold this concession to thirty European settlers. As a result of this policy, capitalist companies controlled around 600,000 hectares, settlers owned approximately half a million hectares, and colonial authorities claimed about 200,000 hectares of forest land. Most investment companies failed to fulfill their commitments regarding land use by settling European immigrants. Instead, they sought quick profits by exploiting the dire circumstances of Algerians and the colonial administration's policies. These companies employed large numbers of Algerians for low wages and extended working hours (Saleh, 1984, pp. 16-17).

The Second Section: Land Confiscation under the Ministry of Algeria and the Colonies (1858-1860)

On June 24, 1858, following significant pressure from settlers, it was decided to implement civil administration in Algeria and abolish the position of Governor General, replacing it with the Ministry of Algeria and the Colonies. This ministry, which lasted only two and a half years until its dissolution on November 24, 1860, was granted all administrative responsibilities in Algeria except for public education and religion.

1. Under Jérôme Bonaparte's Administration:

On June 24, 1858, Emperor Napoleon III appointed his cousin, Jérôme Bonaparte, to lead the newly established Ministry of Algeria and the Colonies, based in France and responsible for managing the affairs of Algeria and other colonies. Jérôme pursued a new policy involving the rigorous application of French laws in Algeria, a territory he never visited and whose challenges he did not fully comprehend. He was known for his animosity towards the clergy and

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military officers, whom he resisted and sought to diminish their influence. Jérôme's policy also targeted the dismantling of the local Algerian aristocracy and the weakening of tribal leaders and local chiefs. He adopted a harsh stance against rebellious tribes, confronting them with military force (**Bouaziz, Colonial Despotism and the Algerian National Movement, 1830-1954, 2007, p. 18**). He resigned in March 1859 and was succeeded by Chasseloup-Laubat.

Jérôme Bonaparte's policies demonstrate his efforts to politically, economically, and administratively serve the settlers by weakening the military's influence and oppressing Algerians through continued land confiscation and tribal dismantlement. Consequently, this new civil system did not significantly differ from the previous military regime, as it continued to serve settlers and restricted Algerians.

2. Under Chasseloup-Laubat's Administration:

After Jérôme Bonaparte's resignation in 1859, Chasseloup-Laubat took over the ministry and continued his predecessor's policies, providing extensive support to settlers. He distributed 4,600 agricultural land plots to European immigrants for free and established 17 agricultural villages. Despite some reports indicating a notable increase in the return of confiscated properties to Algerians during his tenure, he upheld the policy of cantonnement. He went further by abolishing Islamic courts and compelling Algerians to use French judicial systems. Algerians became increasingly fearful of his actions, which gradually undermined their Islamic identity, leading to uprisings such as the 1859 Aurès and the 1860 Hodna revolts against these new policies (**Bouaziz, Colonial Despotism and the Algerian National Movement, 1830-1954, 2007, p. 18**).

This new approach adopted by the Ministry of Algerian Affairs and the Colonies faced fierce opposition from the military and Arab Bureau officers. They resented the ministry's decision to manage all of Algeria's administrative affairs from Paris, deeming it disconnected from reality and opposed to the interests of both the military and settlers. By restoring some confiscated properties to Algerians, they feared it could embolden further claims. They persuaded the Emperor of their viewpoints, prompting his visit to Algeria in 1860 to investigate these claims. The Ministry was eventually abolished, despite settler opposition, and Marshal Pélissier was appointed as the new Governor General, assisted by a consultative council (**Bouaziz, Colonial Despotism and the Algerian National Movement, 1830-1954, 2007, p. 19**).

The Third Section: Land Confiscation under Governors-General Pélissier and MacMahon (1860-1870)

On November 24, 1860, the official abolition of the Ministry of Algeria and the Colonies was announced (**Bulletin Officiel du Gouvernement Générale de l'Algérie, 1860, p. 4**). This decision marked a return to military rule, transferring administrative affairs back from Paris to Algeria. A military governor of marshal rank was appointed, beginning with Pélissier (**Tarchoun, 2017, p. 335**). Upon Pélissier's death in 1864, MacMahon succeeded him, maintaining a similar policy with minor adjustments (**Walid, 2021, p. 641**).

It is worth noting that Pélissier attempted to continue the policies of his predecessor, Governor-General Randon. These policies included exerting pressure on Algerians, confiscating lands, and encouraging European migration to Algeria. He provided necessary services to settlers, such as protection, land preparation, swamp drainage, and the construction of roads, railways, and bridges. However, his approach clashed with the "Arab Kingdom" project proposed by Napoleon III in February 1863, influenced by his translator and advisor, Ismail Urbain. This project envisioned Algeria

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as an "Arab Kingdom" under French control, advocating equal treatment for all residents and proposing limits on European migration and restrictions on land concessions.

In an attempt to realize this vision, Napoleon III directed his imperial council to issue the *Sénatus-Consulte* law on April 22, 1863. This law ostensibly aimed to officially grant land ownership to Algerians, whether the lands were privately owned or communal (arch) lands (Yahya, 2007, p. 19). In practice, however, it sought to dismantle tribal structures and promote individual land ownership, laying the groundwork for future divisions among the tribes.

The Fourth Section: Impacts of the Land Confiscation Policy on Algerians

1. Economically:

A. In the Domain of Property Structure:

Before colonization, land ownership in Algeria was predominantly communal, characterized by collective labor. The colonizers aimed to dismantle this traditional social fabric to weaken strong communal bonds, intending to break apart the old tribal structure without providing a viable alternative in its place. This led to the establishment of a controlled colonial society with a strong material base (Sartre, *Our Wounds in Algeria*, p. 11) . The colonial administration facilitated settlers' agricultural projects by eliminating customs barriers, establishing the Bank of Algeria in 1851, and opening the Algiers Stock Exchange in 1852. Furthermore, they allowed the creation of agricultural companies—around 51, notably the East Constantine Company—and established specialized agricultural institutions to support settlement and encourage investment in land and resources (Labid, 2011, pp. 48-49) .

A significant factor in this transformation was the considerable reduction in agricultural land available to Algerian farmers, which was

largely transferred to settlers. This forced the local economy to adjust, depriving Algerians of fertile land and agricultural resources while creating significant economic challenges for indigenous farmers.

B. Changes in the Economic System:

Over time, the Algerian economy began to undergo a gradual shift. The semi-nomadic Bedouins, who mixed pastoral and agricultural activities in the high plains, were particularly affected, as they were forced to settle permanently rather than migrate as they had done previously. Urban Algerians also faced increasing pressure due to continuous land expropriation (**Adi, 1983, pp. 87-88**) . Three main factors contributed to the breakdown of the traditional economic structure: forced integration into the market economy, escalating taxes, and the generalization of usury practices (**Sari, The Demographic Catastrophe of 1867-1868, trans. Omar El-Maaraji, 2008, p. 287**).

Consequently, grain production and livestock breeding declined sharply. Farmers could no longer effectively cultivate their land, tend to fruit trees, or produce various agricultural products due to limited resources and heavy taxation, resulting in severe consequences, especially from the late 19th century (**Sari, The Dispossession of Farmers from Their Lands, trans. FawziaKendouza-Abbad, 2010, p. 173**) . General Lamoricière once remarked: “The victor must enforce the law of the conqueror. Arabs, defeated militarily, must also be defeated economically. They are compelled, willingly or unwillingly, to abandon their lands to settlers” (**Belkacem, 2018, p. 365**) .

Land use shifted from subsistence grain farming to commercial agriculture aimed at rapid profit, with particular emphasis on vine cultivation. A hectare of vines could yield a profit of 100 to 150 francs, significantly more than the 20 to 25 francs a hectare of grains produced, prompting settlers to acquire more land for vine cultivation. Algerian farmers were deprived of grazing land, often forcing them to sell their livestock, which was a primary source of income and stability (**Himer, 2014, pp. 272-273**) .

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The introduction of open trade and exposure to a volatile liberal-capitalist economy led to price instability in wheat exports, further disadvantaging Algerian farmers. Previously accustomed to a self-contained economy, they were now forced into a liberal market for which they were unprepared (Adi, 1983, p. 70).

Additionally, the colonial administration successfully created a social division of labor that included two contradictory sectors: a traditional sector, primarily based on limited animal husbandry and facing decline, and a modern sector attracting labor from the traditional sector and managed by settlers. This division contributed to the historical formation of Algeria's economic underdevelopment (Adi, 1983, p. 72).

Napoleon III acknowledged this duality in his famous proclamation on the Arab Kingdom, suggesting that the local population should continue with horse breeding, animal husbandry, and subsistence agriculture, while Europeans would exploit forests, mines, and arable lands, and introduce advanced farming techniques. This policy ultimately weakened the traditional agricultural base by detaching Algerian farmers from their means of production (land), integrating them into a market-driven economy, and stripping them of their natural environment, which undermined the traditional sector and transformed it into a labor reserve for settlers (Merdi, 1999, p. 1).

2. Social Impacts

A. Changes in the Structure of Algerian Society

French colonialism in Algeria sought to alter the social system that was predominant within society, as it posed an obstacle to achieving its objectives (Al-Azraq, 1980: 67). To accomplish this, the French authorities implemented policies of expropriation, sometimes through force and other times through arbitrary laws. These measures aimed to dismantle the unity among the Algerian people and foster

individual ownership, while sowing discord among leaders and limiting their influence. General Allard described this approach: "Our policy must aim to weaken the influence of leaders and fragment the tribes" (**Augustin, 1986, pp. 28-29**). This intention was reflected in legislation like the Sénatus-Consulte of 1863 and the Warnier Law of 1873, which facilitated land confiscation and supported settler colonization from 1852 to 1870, affecting more than a million individuals from 272 tribes (**Bernion et al., 1984: 40**).

As a result, douars (administrative units) emerged as new geographical entities with unfamiliar names devoid of historical or cultural significance related to the area. These names often derived from distant regions or were even derogatory. Some douars resulted from the fragmentation of a single tribe, while others amalgamated parts of various tribes. In some cases, entire tribes were merged directly into different settler centers. Inevitably, the delineation of boundaries and the division into douars incited severe conflicts among tribes. Areas affected by these laws experienced increased disputes, particularly over land, as the colonial authorities grouped douars from different tribes into newly established municipalities (**Prade, 1923, pp. 124-125**).

Colonial authorities also sometimes compensated those whose lands were expropriated by redistributing land taken from other tribes, or even from within the same tribe. This redistribution led to conflicts not only between groups and factions but even within families (**Saifou, 2006, pp. 182-183**). These disputes frequently escalated to criminal cases, fueling the workload of the French criminal courts in Algeria (**Bouragda, 2008: 368**). Ultimately, the contested land would be auctioned, often ending up in the hands of a European settler, with the proceeds divided among the disputing parties, leading both to lose their rightful claim to the land (**Adda, 2008: 68**).

Rebellious tribes faced land confiscation, collective punishment, and displacement from their native lands. For example, the Hashm

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tribe, which led the Mokrani uprising in 1871, was forcibly relocated from its homeland in the Maghnia region to the Hodna area beginning in 1876 (Bayram, 2011: 70).

The division of tribes also negatively affected prominent families, whose status and influence waned as their lands were seized. These families, once powerful, found themselves reduced to scattered, isolated individuals. As one French observer noted, "We have dismantled the local community to such an extent that, should we need to exercise any influence over it, we find ourselves without intermediaries and thus unable to convey our intentions or enforce our directives, except by addressing isolated individuals" (Rawahna & Bougriawa, 2021: 200). Ferhat Abbas poignantly described the deterioration of Algerian society: "The tribal chiefs and aristocracy have vanished; the tribes have been fragmented into smaller, more easily controlled douars. A once-proud people who resisted initial occupation have been reduced, bit by bit, to a submissive workforce" (Abbas, 2007: 19).

Strong tribes were ultimately diminished to remnants, with their members forced to work for meager wages as farmhands, tenant laborers, or even soldiers for the French Empire (Abbas, 2012, pp. 23-24).

B. Deterioration of Social Conditions

The economic downturn had devastating social consequences, as poverty levels soared and epidemics spread, peaking in the humanitarian crisis of 1866-1867. This period, marked by severe droughts, locust invasions, plagues, and high taxes, led to a 22% decline in the population. The colonial administration gathered survivors in camps, where they were forced to empty their grain stores, which had once been their only safeguard during periods of scarcity (Bernion et al., 1984: 342).

Charles Lavigerie vividly depicted the horrors of this period: "For months, the Arabs have had nothing to eat but wild herbs and leaves from trees. Their bodies are weak from hunger; they are half-naked, wearing rags, wandering aimlessly around towns from which they have been driven, scavenging for scraps, digging up carrion, even raiding settlers' livestock. Many die daily in the fields" (**Bernion et al., 1984: 341**).

Suicide, murder, and other crimes became widespread as people struggled to survive. There were reports of Algerians resorting to cannibalism, like a woman in Tebessa who ate part of her child, or a young couple from BeniOujana who consumed their mother and sister (**Kileel, 2009: 61**). Others committed theft just to be jailed, where they could find food. The mayor of Oran, Gober, testified: "Entire tribes are reduced to eating prickly pear, and once that runs out, their only remaining option is theft" (**Agron, 2007: 385**).

The people spread out and crowded the dumps and public squares, as well as near French centers, threatening security and health in search of something to satisfy their hunger. At that time, the Europeans shouted for their expulsion. Regarding this situation, Jean-Paul Sartre stated: "They sought to humiliate them and to destroy the dignity in their hearts, reducing them to the status of animals, leaving bodies to live without the souls that would be killed; oppression, conditioning, and punishment are the words that occupy the mind of the colonizer. There is no longer enough space in Algeria for two kinds of people; a choice must be made between them" (**Sartre, Positions contre le colonialisme, trans. Mohamed Marraji, 2007, p. 72**).

Dr. Vital noted in several of his letters what the Algerians were suffering from, stating in a letter dated July 9, 1867: "Only sad things remain before our eyes, such as thirst, hunger, misery, diseases, and people dying in large numbers in the regions of Semeindu and El Alama due to cholera and the famines caused by hunger" (**Bouaziz, Kifāh al-Jazā'ir min Khilāl al-Wathā'iq, 1986, p. 164**).

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Moreover, Mahfoud Qaddash recounts testimonies from some French individuals about this situation, saying: "...that was the fate of those miserable Arab inhabitants. Look at these faces distorted by the horrifying famine. Look at the bodies that horrifyingly resemble human skeletons, and count the tortures of the long dying period that each of these starving individuals endured in their last days." He also adds: "We saw wretches, real walking skeletons, struggling for fourteen days before they died; what terrifying and horrific scenes!" (Qaddash and Sari, 2012, pp. 228-229). These scenes remained etched in the minds of Algerians, who refer to them after several years, calling them the year of locusts (1860), the year of famine, the year of evil, as historical events that stand out (A'ida, 2008, pp. 17-19).

The final result of these events was a terrifying decrease in the population, causing a disturbance in the composition of regions and tribes. The number of victims in the Oran region was estimated at 100,000 victims in the spring of 1868. The mayor of SidiMoussa stated in his testimony to the Lohoun Committee that the number of disaster victims was 217,812, and even livestock were not spared (Makhtari, 2016, p. 107). In the Constantine area, the number of victims was estimated at 160,000 people, and in the Algiers area, the number was estimated at 100,000 people (Bouaziz, Kifāh al-Jazā'ir min Khilāl al-Wathā'iq, 1986, p. 167).

Here we ask: what caused this disaster in a country that was once known as the granaries of Rome and the granaries of Europe in the medieval and modern periods (Claude, 1867, p. 30)? The policy of colonial administration and the French governors in confiscating land and encouraging settlement movements (1852-1870) and its reflections on the Algerians.

Algeria used to produce enough for its inhabitants and livestock, and it was the main supplier of Europe in peace and war. Then, overnight, its inhabitants turned into starving people scavenging from

the dumps. The answer is clear: the confiscation operations, the transfer of lands to colonizers, and the transformation of production from grains to vines and various cash crops were the main reasons for this miserable situation (Zubairi, 1984, p. 40).

CONCLUSION

After addressing this topic and conducting our study and analysis, we reached a series of conclusions that can be summarized as follows:

After the conclusion of what was termed the "phase of hesitation" (1830-1834), the possibility of retaining Algeria diminished, and the number of arbitrary laws and decrees increased, becoming even worse in terms of implementation and consequences. This is evident in the rising frequency of confiscation, appropriation, and judicial guardianship—under the guise of law—against rebellious or migrating tribes, or in the name of public utility. The waves of settlers gradually increased, particularly during the era of Napoleon III (1870), who expressed admiration for the courage of Arabs and their struggle for survival, stating that he was sympathetic to their cause and sought to protect their properties in light of the Arab Kingdom project he initiated. However, reality proved otherwise. The land policy during his reign did not differ from that of his predecessors; rather, the conditions of the Algerians worsened, and the operations of plunder and theft did not cease, especially following the enactment of the *SenatusConsultum* (April 22, 1863), which allowed for the infringement of collective ownership under the pretext of preservation. Consequently, a gradual trend began towards liquidating the properties of the tribes and promoting the establishment of individual ownership to facilitate future dispossession.

Thus, it becomes clear that all the French governors during this period (1852-1870) sought through laws and decrees concerning land—issued during their tenure—to dismantle the tribes, diminish the Algerian spirit of resistance, and dry up the sources of their resilience.

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In contrast, they aimed to encourage and organize settlement. The disastrous outcomes of that policy continue to this day in some regions through changes in the social composition of certain tribes and family conflicts over land ownership. Additionally, there remains a considerable number of families seeking to change their titles that were granted to them by the colonial administration as part of the implementation of land laws. These titles aimed to highlight the individual as an isolated entity and to shift the basis of ownership from the tribe to the individual.

It is necessary to intensify national and international conferences and encourage graduate students to give economic aspects, particularly land issues, the in-depth study they deserve, focusing on models of tribes and areas whose lands were confiscated and whose demographic structures were altered.

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