

Transforming Perceptions and Strengthening Relations: U.S. Soft Power in Algeria

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ABSTRACT: *Rather than solely engaging with the Algerian government to improve diplomatic ties—given the limited leverage available—American officials adapted their strategy to include direct engagement with the Algerian public to build soft power. This article examines the evolution of American soft power in Algeria, emphasizing the strategies employed to cultivate it within the broader framework of public diplomacy. This approach aimed to attract Algerians to American culture, values, and foreign policy objectives, particularly through tools such as cultural diplomacy and social media engagement.*

KEYWORDS: Soft power, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, digital diplomacy, Algerian-American relations.

Introduction

Algerian-American relations have historically been marked by distance and deep-seated differences, consistently hindering any meaningful rapprochement. These strained ties were not solely due to diplomatic and ideological divergences but also stemmed from the broader Algerian public's lack of enthusiasm for closer relations with the United States. The negative perception of the U.S. among Algerians further complicated efforts to establish influence in the country. As a result, American officials recognized that traditional diplomatic channels were insufficient, prompting the need for a new approach. This strategy focused on building soft power. The aim was to attract Algerians to U.S. culture, values, and foreign policy, thereby reshaping their perceptions of the United States and securing support for American foreign policy objectives while establishing influence in Algeria.

Drawing on field research, newspaper articles, surveys, social media insights, government documents, online sources, and personal experiences, this article seeks to answer the following questions: What prompted American officials to develop soft power in Algeria? What strategies did they implement to achieve this goal? And, ultimately, were they successful in building and projecting soft power in Algeria? This article will provide an overview of American soft power in Algeria, highlighting the factors that influenced its development. It will then explore the various strategies employed by the U.S. in this context, focusing on public diplomacy and its key tools—cultural and digital diplomacy. Finally, it will assess the effectiveness of these soft power initiatives while underscoring the challenges and limitations that hinder their success.

American Soft Power in Algeria:

Historically, despite occasional tensions, Algerian-American relations have remained predominantly cordial yet distant, characterized by a U.S. foreign policy of detachment and strategic avoidance. A variety of deeply entrenched obstacles, including ideological and historical differences, have hindered the potential for stronger bilateral relations. Where Algeria embraced socialism, anti-interventionism, non-alignment, and support for revolutionary movements, the U.S. represented the opposite end of the spectrum with its capitalism, interventionism, and imperialist tendencies. For many years, both countries appeared content with this distant relationship, focusing primarily on economic cooperation rather than broader diplomatic engagement. However, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, signs of a mutual desire to improve relations began to emerge. For U.S. officials, building soft power in Algeria by improving the country's image and promoting American ideals, interests, culture, and foreign policy became a key objective, to be achieved through engagement with the Algerian public via public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and, more recently, digital diplomacy.

The term soft power was coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye, who defined it as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies.” (Nye 2009, 11) Soft power focuses on shaping the perceptions and preferences of foreign publics through attraction and persuasion rather than

coercion or force. The idea gained prominence during the Cold War, initially linked to what was then called propaganda—engaging and influencing public opinion through various non-coercive means. This stands in contrast to hard power, which is meant to convey “the application of military power to meet national ends—that is, the deployment of ground troops, naval assets, and precision munitions to secure a vital national objective.” (O’Hanlon and Campbell 2006, 07) However, it also extends to include other means of economic menace or reward besides the use of military threat. (Gray 2011, 08) Both *soft power* and *hard power* aim to establish influence, achieve foreign policy objectives, and protect national interests.

Several factors motivated American officials to build soft power in Algeria, the most significant being the lack of cultural ties between the two countries and the negative perception of the United States among the Algerian population. As a result, American officials aimed to bridge these cultural gaps and enhance the image of the United States through soft power, promoting a more favorable view and attracting Algerians to American culture and ideals and they employed public diplomacy and two of its mechanisms to build and project soft power.

Absence of Cultural Ties Between Algeria and the United States:

The lack of cultural ties between Algeria and the United States can be attributed to several factors. One significant barrier is the lack of a shared language. While most Algerians speak Arabic and Amazigh as their first language and French as their second. For decades, English was offered only as an optional third language, beginning in secondary school. According to a 2022 report by the International Organization of the French Language, 33% of the Algerian population are French speakers, while 68% have some proficiency in French. However, according to a 2012 Euromonitor report, only 7% of the Algerian population could speak English at a basic to intermediate level. French has historically dominated various sectors in Algeria, particularly the education system, where it is taught as a second language from an early age and is widely used in higher education and research. This linguistic dominance is a legacy of Algeria’s colonial past and reflects the deep cultural and historical ties with France. French remains the primary language of instruction in many Algerian universities, especially in fields such as science, medicine, and technology, where much of the academic literature is still produced in French. (Dendane, 2019) Consequently, French culture has been much more prevalent in Algeria than American culture, which until recently was primarily seen through the lens of U.S. interventionism in the region. Furthermore, when Algerian students learn English in middle and secondary school, the curriculum focuses on grammar, reading, writing, and the teaching of Algerian culture in English. Rarely are the students introduced to American culture or history, with any discussion of English-speaking cultures typically centering on the UK rather than the U.S. This lack of exposure further contributed to the minimal cultural connection between the two countries. Furthermore, the two countries do not share a common historical background. Only a few historical events have connected the United States and Algeria, none of which signify a shared history comparable to Algeria's experience with France through colonization, for instance.

Moreover, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the British Council maintained control over English language teaching and promotion in Algeria, rather than the U.S. Embassy and its cultural center. (Belmihoub, 2018) The quality of English education during this period was also reported to be insufficient. A 1984 British Council report highlighted numerous challenges, including shortages of books and teaching materials at all levels, inadequate teacher training, and minimal training for secondary teachers. These educational limitations were compounded by Algeria's strong political and cultural ties to France and its entrenched use of the French language. Recognizing these obstacles, American officials, particularly through the U.S. Embassy in Algeria, began making concerted efforts to address these issues and foster greater cultural and linguistic engagement between the two countries.

The Negative Image of the United States in Algeria:

Beyond the longstanding ideological differences and cultural gaps between Algeria and the United States, Algerians have historically held a negative image of the U.S. This sentiment is closely tied to the anti-interventionist, patriotic, and Arab nationalist beliefs that unite the Algerian population and its government. Algerians view U.S. actions and policies in the Middle East with deep animosity, mistrust,

and suspicion, extending these sentiments to U.S. intentions in Algeria as well. For instance, during the Gulf War in the early 1990s, many Algerians opposed U.S.-led intervention against Iraq and expressed their dissatisfaction through public protests. (Le Monde, 1991) They also condemned the subsequent U.S. invasion of Iraq under the guise of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). For instance, Saddam Hussein is widely regarded in Algeria as a prominent Arab leader and continues to garner sympathy and admiration long after the end of his rule and his death. (BBC, 2008)

The Palestinian cause has further shaped Algerian public opinion of the U.S. Algeria's strong support for Palestine, coupled with America's role as Israel's primary ally, has deepened negative perceptions of the United States. Algeria was the first country to recognize Palestinian statehood in 1988, and the two nations have always maintained strong, privileged relations. (Cafiero, 2020) This bond extends beyond shared Arab and religious sentiments; the parallels between Algeria's own struggle for independence and the Palestinian cause have further solidified their relations. Furthermore, many Algerians blame the U.S. for regional instability, perceiving it as a destabilizing force due to its interventionism and foreign policy decisions. In addition to political grievances, American culture is often viewed negatively by various elements within Algerian society, who perceive it as morally corrupting and harmful to traditional values. Many Algerians view American culture as a threat to the values of Islam, believing it undermines the religious and moral fabric of Algerian society. This combination of political and cultural factors has contributed to a deeply entrenched mistrust and unfavorable view of the United States in Algeria.

American Public Diplomacy in Algeria:

Public diplomacy has emerged as a key mechanism for building and projecting soft power. Joseph Nye noted that traditional diplomacy can be constrained when the public and political institutions in a foreign country, such as the parliament, hold a negative perception of the United States and its policies. (Nye 2009, 103) Public diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy in that it focuses on engaging non-state actors and foreign publics directly, rather than targeting state actors or governments. The term *public diplomacy* was coined in 1965 by Edmund Gullion, a former foreign service officer and dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He described it as diplomacy that "deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies, extending beyond traditional state-to-state diplomacy to include the cultivation of public opinion in other countries, interaction between private groups, foreign affairs reporting, and intercultural communication." (Cull, 2006) The United States, for example, has long recognized the importance of foreign public opinion, it is believed that America's forefathers understood that its views and policies are not always well understood abroad. (Rugh 2014, 07) Thus, public diplomacy acts as a tool for articulating the country's positions and values more transparently to international audiences, fostering a more favorable environment for diplomatic engagement and influence.

Public diplomacy generally aims to mitigate negative perceptions of a country and its policies. For instance, the U.S. faced significant backlash in many Muslim countries due to its actions in the Middle East and the Muslim world, which damaged its reputation. Public diplomacy efforts aimed to address this by engaging directly with local communities and non-state actors. For instance, during the Global War on Terror (GWOT), rising hostility toward the United States, particularly from Arabs and Muslims, prompted American officials to confront this animosity. They attempted to engage with Islamist groups to clarify that Islam itself was not the target; rather, it was extremism and fundamentalism that were being addressed. American officials consistently communicated this message through speeches, press releases, and various communication channels. In Algeria, strategic plans were developed to engage with Islamic non-governmental organizations that provide humanitarian aid, particularly those affiliated with Islamic political parties. The goal was to establish a positive rapport, reduce animosity, and enhance the United States' image. Additionally, recommendations were made to develop collaborative programs with Algeria's Ministry of Religious Affairs and the High Islamic Council, focusing on joint efforts to combat extremism and promote a more favorable perception of the United States. (Department of State documents, 2016)

As Algeria started to recover from the civil unrest in early 2000s, U.S. public diplomatic strategies grew more ambitious and culturally centered. A 2004 correspondence from the U.S. Embassy in Algiers to Assistant Secretary of State Patricia Harrison indicated that the embassy had begun revitalizing its public diplomacy initiatives, taking advantage of the improved security situation and the warming of Algerian-American relations. This new context facilitated the reestablishment of direct contact between the U.S. and Algerian civil society, with a focus on deepening understanding and support for U.S. foreign policy, values, and culture among Algerians. (Department of State, 2016) However, former American Ambassador Cameron R. Hume (1996-2000) had already demonstrated a commitment to public diplomacy years earlier by proactively articulating American positions and policies to the Algerian public during the Algerian civil unrest. He actively engaged in public diplomacy, often organizing press conferences, and giving interviews to local newspapers to present American foreign policy in Algeria as one that sought only positive progress for the country. (Hume, 2006) Hume was one of the first American ambassadors to engage directly with the Algerian population. His interactions led him to believe that the most effective strategy was to engage in public diplomacy through supporting independent press, collaborating with NGOs, bridging cultural gaps, and providing training to help locals address Algeria's economic and political challenges. (Hume 2006, 55) By doing so, he was able to control the narrative and communicate directly with Algerians.

Moreover, Ambassador Hume made recommendations that U.S. officials offer training to Algerian parliament members and union leaders through American organizations such as the AFL-CIO. Additionally, Hume suggested providing Algerian journalists with training opportunities at American universities. (Hume 2006, 49) Essentially, through these efforts Hume laid the groundwork for building American soft power in Algeria. As a result, subsequent American ambassadors to Algeria have consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to public diplomacy. However, more recent U.S. ambassadors, particularly John Desrocher and Elizabeth Moore Aubin, have placed an even greater emphasis on cultural diplomacy, complementing traditional public diplomacy efforts. Current U.S. Ambassador Moore Aubin has also strategically employed cultural diplomacy as a tool to mitigate heightened tensions and maintain engagement during challenging periods. This approach highlights how public diplomacy and its mechanisms, such as cultural diplomacy, can serve as alternative tools—often more acceptable during periods when traditional public diplomacy faces challenges.

American Cultural Diplomacy in Algeria:

Among the tools utilized by the U.S. to build and expand soft power, *cultural diplomacy* holds a significant place. Cultural diplomacy is a key instrument within the broader framework of public diplomacy. The U.S. State Department has referred to it as the “linchpin of public diplomacy,” emphasizing that it is through cultural activities that a nation's identity, values, and worldview are most effectively conveyed to foreign publics. (U.S. Department of State, 2005) Political scientist, Milton C. Cummings defined it as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding.” (Cummings, 2009) This approach enables a country to shape its international image by promoting positive aspects of its culture and values. Given the longstanding cultural gaps that have historically characterized Algerian-American relations, it was a strategic decision for U.S. officials to prioritize bridging these divides through cultural diplomacy, complementing their broader public diplomacy efforts.

Some commentators argue that cultural diplomacy often proves most effective when traditional diplomatic channels are unsuccessful or unavailable, as it can fill the void left by formal diplomatic approaches. (Geoff 2020, 14) It can serve as an alternative or complementary strategy alongside traditional diplomacy. This observation is particularly relevant to the Algerian context, where traditional American diplomacy struggled to improve relations or establish significant influence over Algeria and public diplomacy faced growing challenges. American cultural diplomacy in Algeria is not recent, the American Embassy organized cultural events and operated a cultural center and library since the 1980s. (Belmihoub, 2018) However, these efforts were limited and significantly affected by Algeria's civil unrest, which hindered numerous diplomatic and cultural activities. During this early period, English-language

education in Algeria was also primarily handled by the British Council, limiting the reach and influence of any American initiatives. Towards the end of the civil war, there were signs of increased public engagement by the U.S. Embassy and an expansion of its cultural initiatives.

The revival of American cultural diplomacy in Algeria began during the tenure of U.S. Ambassador to Algeria Cameron R. Hume (1996-2000). Hume was encouraged to engage both the public and officials, exploring more effective and culturally sensitive policies while seeking ways to bridge the gaps between the two populations. (Hume 2006, 22) In his memoir, *Mission to Algiers*, Hume reflects on his experiences in Algeria, highlighting significant challenges such as language and geographic barriers that separated the two countries. He also criticized the U.S. Department of State for its failure to send officers fluent in local languages, which he believed hindered effective communication and, by extension, diplomacy. (Hume 2006, 149) As part of his cultural diplomacy policy, Hume launched an initiative to promote English language teaching in Algeria in late 1990s. He arranged for the Sabre Foundation, which assists libraries and schools by providing books and shipping them, to establish a program in Algeria. With support from U.S. government and donations from American private organizations, the Sabre Foundation helped send books to Algeria. (Hume 2006, 88) Hume recognized that promoting the English language should be a central component of American soft power in Algeria. Subsequent American Ambassadors embraced this approach by supporting English language initiatives, providing access to resources that offer insights into American history, culture, and values. This strategy seeks not only to bridge cultural gaps between the two nations but also to bolster U.S. soft power, ultimately advancing American interests.

The American Embassy and Its Cultural Initiatives:

By the late 1990s, as American foreign policy towards Algeria shifted towards a more proactive and engaged approach, the U.S. began exploring deeper avenues of cooperation with Algeria. Initiatives were launched in the economic and military sectors, while an often-overlooked area—cultural engagement, particularly through English teaching and education—began to gain increased significance. American officials understood that cultural promotion plays a crucial role in enhancing bilateral relations and securing broader support for policy objectives. Part of this effort included promoting English language education and teaching Algerians about American culture and history, particularly drawing parallels between the revolutionary struggles of both nations.

The U.S. Embassy has historically been, and continues to be, the main driver of American cultural initiatives in Algeria. It also manages the *American Cultural Centre in Algeria (ACCA)*, located within the embassy. This center plays a significant role in American cultural diplomacy, acting as a hub that helps build and project U.S. soft power and promotes American culture and values. The location of the center inside the Embassy also creates an environment that mimics the experience of visiting the U.S. The center also offers a free space where visitors can study, read, and participate in events promoting American culture. The center projects an image of the U.S. as a welcoming, helpful, tolerant, and generous nation, emphasizing the importance of education, respect for religious practices, and the protection of personal freedoms without imposing restrictions.

One of the key features of the ACCA is that it provides free access to educational resources such as books, movies, and tools for learning English. This eliminates financial barriers to learning the language and reflects the generosity of the United States. It encourages Algerians of all ages and from all social classes to learn English. While the ACCA is based in the capital, the U.S. Embassy has also extended its outreach by creating *American Corners* all over the country, often located inside universities. These corners provide similar resources, such as books, movies, and learning tools, offering students the chance to engage with American culture and language without the need to travel to the capital or pay for lessons.

The U.S. Embassy in Algeria has also consistently participated in the Algiers International Book Fair, a yearly event that attracts over a million visitors. At this event, the embassy hosts American authors, introduces American exchange programs, and promotes its website and social media platforms to attendees. This participation allows the embassy to engage directly with a broad audience, fostering

cultural exchange and further promoting American values and American cultural programs. (U.S. Embassy, 2019) Moreover, the two countries have expanded their cooperation to include the cultural sector. For instance, in 2020, they signed an executive program focused on the preservation and restoration of Algerian cultural heritage. This initiative was part of a 'five-year roadmap' signed on August 15, 2019, which outlined a series of projects aimed at protecting Algerian cultural property and heritage, while also enhancing scientific, cultural, and educational exchanges between the U.S. and Algeria. (El Moudjahid, 2024)

Furthermore, despite Algeria's stability in recent years, Algerian society remains fairly conservative, with few cultural events. However, recently, there has been increased enthusiasm and openness in relation to concerts, cinemas, exhibitions, and tourism. The U.S. Embassy has taken note of this and started venturing deeper into cultural diplomacy to tap into these emerging opportunities. For instance, the American Embassy has expanded its focus to include art and entertainment in its efforts to build soft power by introducing Algerian artists and the public to American popular culture. For instance, in 2016, Algeria began participating in the OneBeat program, a music initiative that gathers musicians from various countries. The program came to Algeria in 2022, with a residency and concerts in the desert town of Taghit and the capital, Algiers, attracting significant local attention. (U.S. Embassy, 2022) Since the Cold War, the U.S. has utilized popular culture and Hollywood to expand its soft power and project American ideals and policies. However, the limited number of cinemas in Algeria, many of which were closed during the civil unrest, restricts Hollywood's role as a tool for cultural diplomacy and soft power. Despite this, as more Algerians learn English, they increasingly access Hollywood content online, which remains one of the U.S.'s most significant soft power tools.

English Teaching Programs:

As previously mentioned, efforts to promote American culture and English language teaching in Algeria are not recent. In addition to the cultural center and library, two Fulbright lecturers were present in Algeria before the civil unrest. (Belmihoub, 2018) However, these initiatives were insufficient and were largely disrupted by the conflict. Only after the security situation improved in the late 1990s and early 2000s did these efforts gradually resume. These efforts included initiatives aimed at improving the quality of English teaching in Algeria. American officials actively supported local teachers and local authorities by enhancing government programs and offering teacher training. Through these efforts, they contributed to the overall development of English language education in the country, further promoting cultural ties and soft power. For instance, the U.S. Embassy in Algeria launched the English Language Fellow (ELF) program, which sends American educators to other countries to help improve English teaching abroad. In 2003 the U.S. sent its first ELF to work with Algeria's Ministry of Education on teacher training and curriculum reform, adding another Fellow in 2004. Additionally, in 2004, the first American Fulbright professor to return after the civil unrest began teaching at the University of Algiers, marking a significant step in reestablishing academic and cultural exchange between the two countries. (U.S. Department of State, 2016) In 2004, there were plans to host Algerian high school English teachers in the U.S. for further training. These plans recently materialized through the Service-Learning Best Practices for English Classrooms program. These initiatives aim to develop local expertise and modernize English education programs.

These efforts remain ongoing today, with programs such as the Fulbright Teaching Excellence and Achievement (TEA) program. Through these programs, teachers participate in seminars, classroom observations, and activities designed to improve their teaching skills and deepen their understanding of American culture and education. (U.S. Embassy, 2024) The American Embassy in Algeria also launched and sponsored spelling bee competitions, which encourage students to learn English by offering a fun and engaging way to practice the language. The American Cultural Center also offers a space for individuals to practice English with others, utilizing available resources such as books and computers. Ultimately, an increase in the number of Algerians speaking English allows American officials to shape narratives, strengthen relations with the local population, and build soft power. Therefore, these initiatives remain significant.

Exchange and Education Programs:

Beyond its role in promoting the learning and teaching of English and introducing Algerians to American culture, the American Cultural Center in Algeria (ACCA) and its associated corners actively promote American exchange programs and scholarships for Algerian students seeking higher education opportunities in the United States. These exchange programs serve as important tools of American soft power both in Algeria and globally. According to Joseph Nye, who coined the term “soft power,” culture is transmitted through personal contacts, visits, and exchanges. (Nye 2009, 27) Through these programs, the United States effectively exports its ideas and values to foreign students studying at American universities, who might return to their home countries and promote them. Foreign students studying in the United States are also likely to develop a positive perspective of the country after experiencing life in the U.S. and its education system firsthand.

Furthermore, former American Secretary of State Colin Powell emphasized the significance of exchange programs noting the profound impact such initiatives can have on American interests. He remarked, “I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here.” (Powell, 2001) An individual with a degree from a prestigious American university might have a greater likelihood of securing a leadership position in their home country. By increasing the number of students with U.S. educational backgrounds, there is potential to cultivate future leaders who are familiar with American values and culture, and who may advance American interests and adopt these values in their leadership. These individuals would also likely be more open to working with U.S. officials. The American Embassy in Algeria offers several scholarship opportunities to local students, including the Fulbright Foreign Student Program and the Student Leaders Program. Additionally, there are exchange opportunities specifically targeting certain underrepresented demographics, such as programs designed to empower and inspire women to pursue careers in science and technology, including the TechWomen program, TechGirls program, and STEM for Girls initiative. (U.S. Embassy) The Embassy, through its cultural center, also organizes open days where representatives from American universities engage with local students, providing guidance and support in selecting suitable programs and understanding application procedures. EducationUSA, the organization responsible for managing exchange programs, also has an advising center in Algeria that provides guidance and counseling for Algerian students wishing to study in the United States.

Algeria is also part of the Middle East and North Africa Partnership Initiative (MEPI), created in 2002 under the Bush administration, which is considered an American soft power tool. (Department of State) This program was established in the context of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) it provides grants, training, and financial support to individuals, organizations, and governments to promote reform in the region. This initiative also features programs such as Student Leaders and Tomorrow’s Leaders, which offer courses to students from the region at American universities, helping them expand their leadership skills and learn about American values. The goal is for these students, who might occupy leadership positions in the future, to develop a positive perception of the United States and embrace American ideals, ultimately serving American interests in the future.

Furthermore, American officials have always expressed interest in establishing universities and American schools in Algeria, with their interest beginning in 2004. However, it was not until 2016 that they successfully established the American International School of Algiers. Although the school is described as a private institution and not directly sponsored by the U.S. government, it remains under the control and leadership of Americans, with the American Ambassador serving as the Trustee Chairperson. The teachers are also trained in the U.S. and have U.S. and international school-based teaching experience, while the curriculum is supported by the U.S. Department of State's Office of Overseas Schools. (AISA website) This oversight provides the United States with a degree of control over the school, despite its independent status, and this helps create a generation influenced by the American education system. Additionally, there have long been efforts to enhance academic partnerships between Algeria and the United States through formal agreements between higher education institutions in both countries. These agreements create pathways for Algerian students to pursue internships, exchange

programs, and degrees at American universities, gaining exposure to new academic environments and fostering cross-cultural understanding. For instance, the University of Central Missouri recently signed a collaboration agreement with the Higher Institute of Sciences & Technology, marking a significant step in this initiative. (U.S. Embassy, 2004) Such programs promote knowledge sharing and enhance soft power.

Digital Diplomacy:

More recently, with the spread of internet usage in Algeria and the popularity of social media platforms, the American embassy in Algeria has leveraged these tools to implement their public and cultural diplomacy strategies and gain direct access to the Algerian population. Digital diplomacy, defined as “the use of social media for diplomatic purposes,” (Bjola and Holmes 2015, 43) allows for real-time engagement with a broader and more diverse audience. By expanding the reach and accessibility of soft power, digital diplomacy has become a vital instrument that complements and amplifies traditional forms of diplomatic engagement.

As of early 2023, approximately 32.09 million Algerians are internet users, and 23.95 million use social media, representing 52.9% of the total population. (Data Reportal, 2023) These statistics highlight the growing significance of social media in Algeria. Previously, embassy staff and American ambassadors relied on traditional outlets such as print media and television to communicate with Algerians and promote American soft power. However, social media has provided a more direct means of engagement, allowing the embassy to connect with Algerians without intermediaries. The U.S. Embassy maintains official accounts on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, where staff actively share interactive content. These posts sometimes feature the Ambassador speaking in Algerian dialects, wearing traditional Algerian clothing, and participating in local holiday and event celebrations. Additionally, they post videos that introduce Algerians to American traditions and holidays, tutorials to promote English language learning, and educational content about American culture, history and values. Current American Ambassador Elizabeth Moore Aubin is also active on social media, frequently traveling around Algeria and posting videos and pictures that promote tourism and cultural exchange.

The content produced by the embassy has provided the Algerian people—whom rarely have direct interactions with Americans—an opportunity to learn about Americans and their culture through the embassy staff and the videos they create. Some staff members have even gained popularity among Algerians for their engaging content, particularly because of their efforts to learn the local dialect and embrace local traditions. This approach has contributed to reshaping perceptions, fostering a new and positive image of the United States and its people among the Algerian populace. However, while platforms like Facebook and Instagram offer the U.S. Embassy greater access to Algerians, their number of followers remains relatively low compared to the overall population. Moreover, these platforms often serve as outlets for expressing discontent and criticism, limiting their effectiveness in fostering positive engagement. For example, during events that heighten anti-American sentiments, Algerians frequently use the Embassy’s platforms to voice their criticism of the U.S. and reject American influence, undermining the positive image the Embassy seeks to promote.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of American Soft Power in Algeria:

While scholars such as Joseph Nye emphasized the importance of soft power alongside hard power, this concept continues to face numerous challenges. Theoretically, the notion of soft power and its related concepts are often clouded by confusion, even among those responsible for implementing them. Additionally, practical obstacles impede the effective establishments of soft power, notably in the context of American soft power in Algeria. For instance, Nye asserts the significance of non-state actors in building and projecting soft power, describing them as “flexible” and “particularly effective in penetrating states without regard to borders.” (Nye 2009, 92) However, in the context of American soft power in Algeria, there is a noticeable absence of non-state actors, which significantly undermines its effectiveness.

Moreover, the activities of the U.S. Embassy in Algeria, as part of its soft power practices, are significantly influenced by the local President's foreign policy stance and the overall state of bilateral relations. For instance, during the presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the Embassy enjoyed greater freedom due to Bouteflika's favorable disposition towards the United States and his eagerness to enhance relations. In contrast, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, in response to the current political climate—particularly the strain caused by former President Donald Trump's decisions regarding the Western Sahara issue—has adopted a more cautious and distant foreign policy toward the U.S. (Reuters, 2020) This shift has led to restrictions on the Embassy's activities, forcing its staff to limit their engagement in order to avoid raising suspicion and prevent further deterioration of bilateral relations.

Furthermore, the limited reach of the American Cultural Center, located in the capital Algiers, and the small number of American Corners restricts the overall impact of U.S. soft power in Algeria. In a survey I conducted, 72% of respondents indicated they had never visited the American Cultural Center or any of its corners. Moreover, more Algerians are now learning or showing interest in English over French. For example, a survey by the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education found that 80% of university students favored replacing French with English in higher education. (Yahi, 2023) However, this growth remains modest; for example, in 2019, Algeria ranked 90th globally in terms of English proficiency. (Baghdadi, 2019) Additionally, the language's rising importance in Algeria is driven less by American soft power efforts and more by globalization and the government's decision to replace French with English as the first foreign language. (Asharq al Awsat, 2023)

Furthermore, despite intentions to launch numerous initiatives and programs in Algeria as part of American soft power in Algeria, many of these initiatives have not materialized. Bureaucracy continues to pose significant challenges to Algerian-American relations and cooperation in general including cultural initiatives. For example, concerning the establishment of the American International School of Algiers (AISA), negotiations between American officials and the Algerian government began in 2004, yet the school did not open its doors until 2016. Such bureaucratic hurdles often result in substantial delays and can lead to a loss of interest in pursuing collaborative efforts. Additionally, Algeria's history and the composition of its society contribute to a rigid and conservative mindset that often rejects outside influence, posing significant challenges to the effectiveness of soft power. The country's colonial past has fostered a deep-seated mistrust of foreign powers with vested interest in the country, leading to skepticism even regarding cultural initiatives and a general aversion to outside influences. Furthermore, U.S. soft power in Algeria faces competition from other actors vying for influence in the region, particularly France, which is struggling to maintain its historical foothold, and China. Given Algeria's unique socio-political landscape, China's approach to soft power—characterized by substantial economic initiatives, infrastructure investments, and a non-interventionist policy—often resonates more effectively with the Algerian population. Many Algerians prefer China's focus on mutual economic development and its respect for national sovereignty, especially when contrasted with the more interventionist tendencies associated with American foreign policy, which many Algerians tend to reject. This dynamic poses a significant challenge to the effectiveness of American soft power in Algeria, particularly in the context of U.S. competition with China for influence in Algeria and the broader region.

In contrast, certain cultural diplomacy initiatives, particularly exchange programs, have greater potential for success as they foster long-term relationships with students who might rise to positions of power and, in turn, serve American interests. A notable example in Algeria is Chakib Khelil, who served as Minister of Energy and Mines during President Bouteflika's administration. Educated in the United States and having spent significant time working there, Khelil actively sought to reform the hydrocarbon law that had historically posed challenges for American officials and hindered U.S. economic interests in the country. (Reuters, 2016) Khelil has faced accusations from Algerians and the Algerian workers party for prioritizing U.S. interests, a perception rooted in his ties to the United States through his academic and professional history. (El Chorouk, 2018) With an increasing number of Algerians expressing interest in U.S. exchange programs and applying for scholarships to study in the United States, this strategy appears to have a greater chance for achieving long-term success. Furthermore, the younger generation in Algeria

is increasingly exposed to American popular culture and shows more enthusiasm for learning English, visiting the United States, studying there, and enhancing bilateral relations.¹

Conclusion:

In conclusion, measuring the success of soft power is challenging, particularly compared to hard power, where outcomes are more tangible and quantifiable. This difficulty is further amplified in Algeria, where data on public sentiments (polls, surveys...etc.) and the effectiveness of U.S. soft power initiatives is not only limited but essentially nonexistent. The lack of reliable metrics makes it challenging to assess the true impact of U.S. efforts. While there are signs of progress in building American soft power, numerous indicators reveal persistent challenges and shortcomings. For instance, the negative image of the United States continues to exist among the Algerian population, and efforts to enhance soft power have not fully succeeded in altering this perception or reaching a significant portion of the public. Although, as this article illustrates, several initiatives have been launched by the Embassy to improve the United States' image and foster soft power, the deeply entrenched negative perception and the considerable divide between the two countries suggest that public diplomacy, cultural initiatives, and digital outreach alone are insufficient to remedy this situation. The obstacles are too deep to be overcome by these approaches. More importantly, the capacity to implement reforms that align with U.S. values or policies—and to shift foreign policy in favor of American interests, which are central to the goals of soft power—rests with the Algerian president. (Constitution, 2020) He is in control of foreign policy decision-making, and his choices continue to be shaped by revolutionary and ideological principles that largely contrast with American values and interests. Consequently, the effectiveness of soft power is unlikely to significantly benefit U.S. interests and influence in Algeria. The potential impact of building U.S. soft power in Algeria is constrained by deeply entrenched ideological and historical obstacles that have long shaped Algerian-American relations and are difficult to overcome.

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¹ A survey I conducted reveals that 84% of respondents expressed a desire for improved Algerian-American relations.

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