

France's Macron admits to military's systematic use of torture in Algeria war

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The Algerian War, long a source of national trauma for France, had a profound influence on its political institutions.



French President Emmanuel Macron leaves the home of Josette Audin, widow of Maurice Audin, who was tortured and killed during the Algerian War. Michele Audin, Maurice's daughter, walks next to Macron. (Thomas Samson/AFP/Getty Images)

PARIS — France formally acknowledged its military's systemic use of torture in the Algerian War in the 1950s and 1960s, a step forward in grappling with its colonial legacy.

President Emmanuel Macron issued a statement in the context of a call for clarity about the fate of Maurice Audin, a 25-year-old mathematician and anti-colonial activist who was tortured by the French army and forcibly disappeared in 1957, during Algeria's bloody struggle for independence from France.

Audin's death is a specific case, but it represents a cruel system put in place at the state level, the Elysee Palace said. "His disappearance was made possible by a system that ... allowed law enforcement to arrest, detain and question any 'suspect' for the purpose of a more effective fight against the opponent," read Macron's statement.

Benjamin Stora, a leading French historian of Algeria, said Macron's recognition represented a move away from the "silence of the father" stance that has characterized France's relationship to its colonial past for decades.

"It permits us to advance," he told The Washington Post, "to exit from denial and to advance in the service of truth." Stora accompanied Macron on Thursday afternoon on an official visit to Audin's widow, Josette Audin, 87.

Macron, 40, is the first French president born after the war and has shown a rare willingness to wade into the memory of Algeria, arguably the most sensitive chapter in the French experience of the 20th century and one that has had a profound influence on the country's political institutions.

Conquered by France in 1837, Algeria was a colony but also cast as an integral part of the country. By the 1950s, it was home to millions of French settlers, and when France was forced to give up overseas possessions in West Africa and Southeast Asia, it always held on tightly to Algeria.

When the country revolted in 1954, the suppression was savage. "Everyone knows that in Algiers the men and women arrested in these circumstances did not always return," the Elysee statement read. "Some were released, others were interned, others

were brought to justice, but many families lost track of one of their own that year, in the future capital of Algeria.”

The shadow of the Algerian War on French society has been compared to that of the Vietnam War for the United States, but even more divisive.

On a visit to Algeria in February 2017, Macron, then a presidential candidate, called French colonialism “a crime against humanity,” a remark that reignited a bitter national debate.

In addition to recognizing state-authorized torture, Macron called for the opening of archives concerning those who disappeared, such as Audin.

“A general dispensation, by ministerial decree, will be granted so that everyone — historians, families, associations — can consult the archives for all those who disappeared in Algeria,” the Elysee statement read. “We’re putting the issue of the missing in the center.”

Macron’s statement drew hopeful comparisons to the last time a French president publicly atoned for the sins of the past — Jacques Chirac’s 1995 apology for France’s collaboration in the Holocaust, specifically in facilitating roundups of its own citizens who were then handed over to the Nazis.

Chirac’s speech represented a major shift in the way the French public and political establishment understood its past. In the years that followed, a more nuanced picture of France’s role in the Holocaust was taught in national schools, and memorials were erected throughout the country, including a prominent Holocaust memorial museum in central Paris.

Some wonder whether similar action on Algeria, once unthinkable, could now be possible.

The two events are vastly different, said Stora, who was born in Algeria in 1950 to a Jewish family that left for France in 1962, in the midst of the upheaval. But he said Macron’s admission nevertheless presented many former colonial subjects, including French Muslims of Algerian origin, “the sentiment of being respected in their history.”

“It will be very difficult for political successors to walk this back,” Stora said.

For Yasser Louati, a Muslim community organizer and prominent activist against Islamophobia in France, Macron’s statement is a “historic moment,”

but one that does not go far enough.

Although the French president has drawn attention to colonial crimes that occurred in Algeria, there is still a reluctance to confront the violence that occurred in France itself, such as the brutal massacre by French police of pro-independence Algerian protesters in Paris in October 1961. Historians estimate that as many as 200 were killed in that event.

“We also have to deal with the legacy of the colonial era,” Louati said.

France’s current system of government came into being in 1958, in response to an attempted coup by French generals in Algiers.

“Giving powers to the president of the republic, strengthening the executive to the detriment of the legislative branch — all that is Algeria,” Stora said. “French political culture lives in the memory of that war.”

Macron has hardly shied away from using these colonial-era executive powers, and at times he has relied on security provisions that stem from Algeria, notably the “state of emergency” put in place after recent terrorist attacks.

Among other things, the emergency provision, which dates from 1955, gives French authorities the power to place terrorism suspects under house arrest without warrants, which critics and activists said led to French police detaining French Muslims with impunity.

Thursday’s presidential decree was widely seen as a victory for the history profession, and one historian in particular — the late Pierre Vidal-Naquet. The official French army position had been that Audin ran away while being transferred. But in May 1958, less than a year after Audin was killed, Vidal-Naquet published a detailed account of the case that argued Audin had been tortured to death.

Macron began his statement with a quote from Vidal-Naquet and championed the historian’s work as justification for encouraging further research. “It is important that this story be known, that it be viewed with courage and lucidity,” Macron’s statement read.



Maurice Audin, an assistant university math teacher in Algiers and member of the Algerian Communist Party, went missing after being arrested in June 1957, during the Algerian War. (AFP/Getty Images)



Gen. Jacques Massu, center, tours Algeria with Council President Guy Mollet in January 1957. (Gamma/Keystone/Getty Images)