

The Role of Secret Radio during the Algerian War of Independence

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Abstract:

The Algerian people employed various methods in their struggle against the French colonizer. Alongside military and political efforts, media was one of the most prominent tools that had an effective impact on the course of the resistance. Media methods ranged from print journalism to statements and other forms, with the addition of radio broadcasting, which emerged with the Algerian War of Independence.

Through this article, we aim to shed light on the role of radio during the Algerian War of Independence, particularly the secret radio stations, which were a source of concern for the French colonizer. These stations played a counter-propaganda role, opposing the misinformation and lies spread by the French. Additionally, we highlight the prominent Algerian figures that played an active role in this field.

key words: *Secret radio; Algerian liberation movement; propaganda; counter-propaganda*

Introduction

During their struggle against French colonialism, Algerians realized the importance of media in supporting the Algerian revolution. Media, in various forms, was seen as a key means of confronting the occupier alongside armed struggle. After utilizing newspapers, statements issued by the nationalist movement, the November 1, 1954 Declaration, the Soummam Conference Charter, cinema, and theater, they turned to radio to broadcast their just cause to all corners of the world, counter French propaganda, and respond to the statements of French politicians and military leaders who sought to sow doubts among Algerians about the revolution.

Radio played a distinguished role during the liberation revolution, and we will highlight this by examining the key historical milestones that characterized the radio's role during the revolution, the major difficulties and obstacles, and the individuals associated with the revolutionary radio work in Algeria.

1. The Emergence and Development of Radio in Algeria

The emergence of radio in Algeria coincided with its appearance in France in 1925. Initially, it was a French-operated station under the Ministry of Post, and remained so until 1943. At that point, it was placed under the supervision of the General Governor of Algeria, specifically to oversee programming directed at Algerian Muslims, while remaining under French government oversight in Paris. The radio was primarily aimed at the European community, with entirely French-language programs. The Arabic language did not "invade" the medium until after 1943.

In 1945, the General Governor was granted broader powers in this domain and became the head of the Algerian Radio Committee, which consisted of 6 members from the Algerian Council (3 Muslims and 3 Europeans), 6 figures with an interest in radio affairs, and 6 representatives of the radio staff and workers¹.

In 1945, an Arabic-language channel was created, with a dedicated studio for producing programs. Another channel was established in 1948, broadcasting in Kabyle, also with its own studio. Additionally, numerous studios were built in Constantine, Oran, and Béjaïa, and technical equipment was supported and developed. Technical improvements were made to transmission stations and connections in several Algerian cities, increasing transmission power to 322 kilowatts in 1957, up from just 25 kilowatts in 1946. In 1959, the radio headquarters was moved to Paris.

The colonizer's main goal in focusing on radio was propaganda. The content broadcasted sought to reinforce occupation and spread colonial ideas, while also serving the needs of the European minority, particularly in coastal areas. This experience inspired Algerians to seek a means to create a similar medium that would reflect their convictions, defend their identity, promote their ideas, and support their revolution.

2. The Importance of Media during the Algerian Revolution:

The National Liberation Front (FLN) recognized the importance of media and its role in the liberation struggle, understanding that the success of the revolution depended largely first on armed action and then on political organization. This was particularly crucial given that, despite the clear justice of the Algerian cause, it was surrounded by many complexities. For a century and a quarter, international public opinion had known Algeria only as an inseparable part of France. Consequently,

Algerians were seen not as a separate people but as a backward sector of the French population².

This complexity meant that the Algerian case was not merely about a people fighting for political independence, but also about restoring dignity to an Arab Muslim people with no ties to the French, neither in origin nor in belief. Thus, the FLN's media had to confront several major challenges, including³:

- **Breaking the notion** propagated by France since 1830 that Algeria was an integral part of France, and convincing international public opinion that there is an Algerian people with its own identity and heritage, who cannot become French and have the right to live a free and dignified life like other peoples of the world.
- **Revealing the other side of France's reality**, which was renowned worldwide as a land of justice, freedom, and equality, by showcasing its inhumane policies towards the Algerian people since 1830, leading to the majority living in dire poverty and deprivation.
- **Convincing international opinion** that the emerging revolutionary movement in Algeria, born from nothing, was capable of taking over the management of the country.

3. Media Policy During the Liberation Revolution:

One of the key goals that the revolution aimed to achieve during this period was to connect with the people and inform citizens about the reality of the armed struggle against the enemy. This included mobilizing the masses to rally around the revolution for liberation and independence, protecting Algerian citizens from colonial media and its psychological and ideological warfare, and countering enemy media and refuting its propaganda. To achieve these goals, the revolution used various media and communication methods, including⁴:

- **The November 1st Declaration:** This was the first media action announcing the birth of the Algerian revolution. It successfully penetrated colonial media and addressed the Algerian masses in the language of revolution and liberation, resonating strongly with the people and mobilizing them.
- **The Soummam Conference:** This conference provided numerous solutions to the challenges faced by the Algerian revolution in the field of media and propaganda. It addressed these issues in its political framework and decisions. The conference

highlighted the lack of coordination among the media bodies representing the revolution, leading to the decision to abolish all editions of the newspaper *La Résistance Algérienne* and replace it with *El Moudjahid*. Section three of the political framework of the Charter titled "Means of Work and Propaganda" includes the following: "Respond quickly and clearly to all lies and denounce acts of provocation. Inform the National Liberation Front's orders by establishing numerous and diverse offices to reach all areas, even the most isolated ones. Increase propaganda centers and equip them with writing and printing machines and paper to copy national documents and print local publications. Print messages about the revolution and an internal bulletin for instructions and guidance directed to professionals"

4. Voice of Algeria among Arab Countries

During that period, the revolution's leadership realized that military action alone was insufficient and needed to be supported by media efforts. Media could engage public opinion, and the challenge was significant given that the French enemy had substantial resources in this field.

In the first two years, the Algerian revolution relied on the radio broadcasts of Arab countries, particularly Egypt and Tunisia, to communicate its message to the Algerian people and the world. Notably, Radio Voice of the Arabs from Cairo played a significant role starting in 1955, dedicating three weekly programs to Algeria in both Arabic and French⁵:

- "**Algérien parle aux Français**" (An Algerian Speaks to the French) in French, presented by *Idir Ben Khatta*, was broadcast daily from the Cairo International Radio for fifteen minutes, aimed at France.
- "**La Voix du Front de Libération Nationale vous parle du Caire**" (Voice of the National Liberation Front Speaks to You from Cairo), was broadcast in Arabic by Radio Voice of the Arabs and featured daily political commentary. After the formation of the Provisional Government, it was renamed "**La Voix de la République Algérienne**" (Voice of the Algerian Republic) and was broadcast in French.

The Tunisian radio also dedicated a program, "**Ici la Voix de l'Algérie moudjahida sœur**" (Here is the Voice of Sister Revolutionary Algeria), which was broadcast three times a week. One of the main hosts of this program was *Issa*

Massoudi. The program provided military news, political commentary, and supported the network to open special programs on most Arab and foreign radios, including stations in Tripoli, Damascus, Cairo, Baghdad, Beijing, Benghazi, Marsa Matruh, Accra, Conakry, and Rabat⁶.

5. The Beginnings of Secret Radio

Long live Algeria... Long live the people of Algeria, free, sovereign, strong, and united. Victory is ours... Long live the heroic liberation army... And woe to colonialism..." These phrases were frequently broadcast over the airwaves of the Fighting Algeria Radio, irritating the French colonizers who attempted to silence the voice of the revolutionaries. However, *Issa Massoudi* and his comrades thwarted these attempts with their voices echoing in villages, mountains, military barracks, and in the hearts yearning for freedom.

The secret radio was the voice of Algeria's struggle for freedom from the oppressive French colonizer. During this period, it played a significant role in introducing the Algerian revolution to the Arab and global public. It was the first Algerian audio media to enter the radio waves battle against the occupation, countering the colonial propaganda that claimed "Algeria is French."

The secret radio emerged in Morocco, specifically in the city of *Nador*, on December 16, 1956, after the revolution acquired advanced American-made communication devices, which were adapted for radio broadcasting, such as the *PC610*. The secret radio managed to broadcast daily from a mobile truck of the *GMC* type for two hours starting from 8 PM. It began its broadcasts with the national anthem, followed by news about events in Algeria, focusing on battle news and the losses inflicted on the enemy by the revolutionaries⁷.

In 1957, the revolution's leadership began training several trainees in the field of signaling, from among students who had joined the revolution since May 1956. These trainees were supported with fifty devices from West Germany, model *AngRC9*, which helped expand communication networks across the country's regions⁸.

The content of the first broadcast on that day was related to political liberation, focusing on explaining the reasons that led the revolution's leaders to announce armed struggle and rebellion against French colonialism. They were convinced that the liberation of the homeland should be embraced by the people and that their support was crucial for achieving its goals⁹.

The radio began its programs with phrases such as “Here is the Fighting Algeria Radio” or “The Voice of the National Liberation Front speaks to you from the heart of Algeria,” broadcasting in Arabic, French, and Amazigh. Its programs included military reports, political commentary, responses to colonial propaganda, and other promotional and educational content aimed at providing Algerians with news of the revolution and developments both inside and outside the country.

The radio continued broadcasting from *Nador* in Morocco until independence on July 5, 1962. It provided news about the revolution, exposed the brutality of colonialism to the world, and its massacres against unarmed civilians. It was committed to making Algeria's voice heard at all international forums, contributing to the realization of Algeria's dream of living in freedom and independence¹⁰.

It is worth noting that *Abdelhafid Boussouf* was the first to conceive the idea of the secret radio. At that time, he was the leader of the Fifth Wilaya. The task of managing its media content was handled by activists such as *Kamal Daoudi*, who was responsible for the Amazigh section; *Issa Massoudi*, who was in charge of the Arabic section; and *Mustapha Toumi*, who managed the French and colloquial sections. Additionally, *Médani Hwas*, *Belayed Abdel Salam*, *Mohamed Soufi*, *Abdel Rahman El Ghouati*, *Khaled Soufi*, *Dahou Ould Kablia*, *Khaled Tiyani*, *Abdelmadjid Mzyan*, and *Rachid Negar*, among others, were involved. According to activist *Mustapha Toumi*, they were committed to delivering news and information to the citizens in three languages¹¹.

Initially, the radio did not have revolutionary national anthems as they were not yet recorded. Therefore, its team used some Arabic songs and anthems, such as the Egyptian song by Lebanese artist *Najah Salam*: “**Oh bird, oh flying bird, bring the good news, go to Algeria.**”

6. The Provisional Government's Interest in the Secret Radio:

The radio had a significant impact on the hearts of Algerians, especially through stations in Arab countries, alongside the secret radio in Algeria. When the Provisional Government was established in 1958, it formed a Ministry of Information responsible for disseminating news about various revolutionary activities. In 1961, the Algerian News Agency was established, modeled after news agencies in independent countries¹².

After the establishment of the Algerian Provisional Government on September 19, 1958, the leadership of the liberation revolution increased its focus on supporting media efforts in general, and radio broadcasting in particular. The secret radio benefitted from equipment upgrades, strengthened broadcasts, and an increase in broadcast hours. Additionally, the team was bolstered by the addition of several militant journalists, including the renowned "Issa Massoudi," who was nicknamed the symbolic voice of the Algerian Revolution.

7 The Challenges Faced by the Secret Radio

The French attempted to obstruct the success of this radio by jamming its programs. However, thanks to its young technicians who devised various methods, the secret radio was able to counter these efforts. For instance, they brought the secret radio's broadcast frequencies closer to those of France or any country with good relations with France. As a result, any jamming attempts by France would primarily harm France itself, followed by its allies¹³.

According to Mustafa Toumi, the head of the French language department at the secret radio at the time, the French colonizers used technical search methods to locate the broadcasting truck, but all their attempts failed. The radio chose shortwave frequencies instead of longwave because the latter required more electricity and larger equipment, which were not available due to the war conditions¹⁴.

The colonial authorities tried to jam the radio's programs by broadcasting Arabic songs from a radio station in Algeria on the same frequencies as the secret radio. They also repeatedly attempted to locate the vehicle to destroy it. On one occasion, they managed to determine its location and sent an aircraft that launched flares in preparation for bombing it. However, the vigilance of the guards and their quick response foiled the attempt.

It's worth noting that the radio stopped broadcasting for several months between 1957 and 1958 due to the mobile equipment's inability to meet the necessary demands. The Front then acquired new equipment, which was installed near the city of Nador in agreement with Moroccan officials. The broadcasting equipment was set up 15 kilometers away, and the broadcasts resumed as before¹⁵.

Conclusion:

Thanks to its staff and the policies of the revolutionary leaders, the secret radio became an effective weapon in the hands of the revolutionaries, rivaling the effectiveness of military arms. One of its most notable features was its distinctively Algerian identity, both in its programming and its political framework. Despite limited resources and experience, the secret radio successfully achieved its goals of instilling fear in the hearts of the colonizers, fostering confidence among Algerians, and breaking the media isolation imposed on them. Additionally, the Algerian revolution received significant media support from Arab and foreign countries, whose radio stations served as platforms to promote the Algerian cause.

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