

EU Cross Mediterranean cultural policies - The implementation of EU cultural policy in Algeria

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Abstract

This presentation will explore some of the EU programmes in Algeria which have explicitly, or implicitly, targeted the cultural sector over the last decade. It will discuss reasons for the previously limited role of the EU in culture and explore the role of cultural associations in implementing EU programmes.

Despite ambitious EU policy statements, a successful annual cultural festival, and receptive actors within Algerian civil society and the state, the EU's engagement in Algeria has been limited. Institutional, bureaucratic, linguistic, economic and historical factors all weigh heavily upon relations between Algeria and the EU in the cultural domain. Algeria has historically resented the hub and spoke approach of the EU, with standardised programmes applied across the ENPI region, whatever the sector.

Yet, all these difficulties have, it is argued, potentially led to a more promising environment in which the EU could intervene in Algeria in the cultural sector. And recent culturally oriented EU programmes have been identified, in external evaluations, as successes. It is argued that a less normative approach, lower funding levels and more open scope for project proposals, has enabled the EU to slowly build up a stronger relationship in Algeria, and to work more effectively with ministries and associations in a challenging context. With the commitment of €21.5 million to support heritage and culture in 2011, and Algerian actors signing up to regional programmes such as the €17 million "Media and Culture programme," EU is placing itself, with the approval of the Algerian government, as a major actor in Algeria in the cultural domain.

The implementation of EU Cultural Policies in Algeria

Introduction

With the “fading allure of the peace project narrative” framing the European project, the cultural sector has taken increasing prominence, both internally within the EU, but also in its foreign and international relations (ECF). The following presentation will explore the role of the European Union in cultural policies and programmes in Algeria, to assess to what extent this role has been a significant one. The paper will ask about the challenges and possible successes there may have been, and whether and how the EU influences the cultural sector and hence quality of life in the specific case of Algeria. Is the EU a major player? Why? Are there other more significant actors?

To discuss how successful the EU has been, or could be, we will first explore the specificities of the Algerian context in the cultural domain. We will then explore the history of the EU in the Cultural sector in Algeria, and finally identify specific challenges and successes.

The Algerian Context

The Algerian Cultural sector, and relations between cultural actors in Algeria and their partners abroad, are complex domains. After 132 years of French colonial rule, re-establishing its own cultural identity was one of the most important policy areas for the Algerian Government upon independence in 1962. Post-independence, the reconstruction of cultural identity, was both physical (including the reconstruction of many the cultural institutions, such as the Algiers University Library, burnt down in 1962 by the OAS) and psychological, given the suppression of the Arab Muslim culture for over a century under colonialism.

In a detailed report by Ammar Kessab 2014, funded by the European Union’s MedCulture programme, he identifies three phases for Cultural Policy in Algeria. From 1962 to 1989, a soviet inspired, nationalistic model was followed, through which the promotion of Arabo-Muslim cultural identity and the anti-colonial struggle, as a unifying force, were at the forefront. During ten years of violent conflict which consumed Algeria in the 1990s, the cultural sector was more or less abandoned by the state. Then, from 2000 on, with the arrival of President Bouteflika, the new Culture Minister Khalida Toumi and the return of peace, a strong hegemonic cultural programme was put in place. Through this, the state regained control as the sole contractor for the vast majority

of cultural activities in the country. As we will explore, there was a small, but relatively open, space for external actors, such as the EU, during this period.

During this most recent phase, of hegemonic control by the Ministry of Culture in Algeria, the national and culture budget went from \$64 million annually to over \$300 million. This is in line with the overall increase in the Algerian budget with the windfall in gas and oil revenues. This hugely increased budget remained consistent, as a percentage of the Algerian budget at around 0.5%.

National institutions and in particular large scale ministry lead international festivals remained the most significant part of the MOC's spending. Very little funding was given to civil society, independent organisations or the private, independent sector. The state dominated all aspects of cultural life. With the new Minister appointed in 2014 Nadia Labidi, this could however now be changing.

Lack of transparency and opaque management has fed into frustrations about the cultural sector. Kessab's report in 2014 notes the lack of data, information and access, and resultingly, the lack of a coherent national cultural policy, other than the funding of large scale events. Celebrating 50 years of independence in 2012, the festival, Algiers, Capital of Arab Culture, reached an all time high of \$560 million.

Civil society cultural organisations and the independent sector are attributed only 0.2% of the Algerians' significant Culture budget. Despite this, the number of cultural and artistic associations in Algeria has risen significantly in the last decade. Following reforms to the Laws on Association, cultural associations rose to over 6000 by 2009 (Kessab, 2014), to over 10,000 in 2012 (Ministry of Interior figures for registered associations 2013). These include many literary, theatrical, history and heritage associations across the country. These associations however, struggle to be active, given the difficulty of finding funds, a lack of capacity building opportunities and strained relations with the state bodies which are accustomed to complete control over all domains of cultural expression in the country, as part of the political project.

The domination of the Ministry and its top level infrastructure projects can be witnessed on the website of the National Agency for Large Scale Culture Projects (ARPC.dz). On this francophone website, eight significant projects are detailed: the Algiers Opera House, the Arab South American Library, the Algiers Auditorium, the Arab Archeological Centre, the Museum of Modern Art in Oran, the Professional Institute for the Arts and the Regional Institute of Music. The agency was created by the Ministry in 2007. It was set up to implement large scale cultural projects mainly conceived by President Bouteflika during his international visits and show the diversity and aspirations of Algerian

foreign policy. As yet, none of these huge infrastructure projects, conceived as far back as 2003, have been completed. Yet they continue show the wide range of diplomatic ties that the Government sought to pursue over the last decade – and the absence of European partners among them. The Chinese are constructing - and financing – the National Opera House, and the Brazilian architect Oscar Neimeyer was selected for the project of the Arab-South American Library. There are no European partners in these very significant, large scale projects of the Ministry.

2 History of EU funding Culture in Algeria

EU cultural policy has gained in importance internally in the last decade with lobbying from European civil society organisations such as the European Cultural Foundation. The ECF has argued for a more important place for Culture in the European project and as a way of developing a European identity, and promotion European integration, with increasing internal tensions and the fading of the peace project narrative. Equally, in its external relations, there has been much lobbying to increase the Cultural Sector as a means to unite, transcend borders and for intercultural dialogue and understanding, a soft diplomacy within the EU's means. Advocacy initiatives such More Europe – External Cultural Relations in 2011 have encouraged the European Institutions to focus on Culture in its cooperation programmes and diplomacy. Initially focusing on Eastern neighbours, the Southern Mediterranean has more recently been targeted for increasing cooperation in the cultural sector. Since the Barcelona declaration, 'intercultural dialogue' has been a key term (Silvestri, 2005)

In Algeria, the EU has a strained history. The EU Delegation closed its doors during the 1990s. It only quietly relaunched its programmes in the early 2000s, with ambitious funding objectives, which had very low levels of implementation across all sectors. There were difficult relations with the Algerian government on its return. On top of the continued mistrust related to European colonial history and lack of reconciliation after the independence war, Algeria was now recovering from one of the most violent internal struggles of the last century. Having lost an estimated 200,000 lives in the Islamist insurgency, many more Algerians were still in exile in neighbouring countries. Ministry staff were traumatised, systems broken down, corruption (and fear of corruption) was high. There was no experience of working with the complex bureaucratic procedures of the EU, and a reticence from both sides to have European technical assistance in the Ministries. With a highly educated and qualified population and public sector, Algeria did not really want 'help' from Europeans, with their tainted history, nor trusted them in their ministries. For their part, Europeans had been absent from

Algeria for almost a decade, and struggled to understand this context and the extent of the suffering Algerians had experienced and its impacts.

The Algerian cultural sector had suffered in particular during the decade of violence, with the assassination of hundreds of playwrights, journalists, artists and musicians by the Islamist insurgency. Despite this very difficult context however, over the last decade, the EU did nevertheless manage to support the Cultural Sector in three ways: through supporting civil society, through annual festivals, and through technical training. I will explore these three approaches briefly, before looking at some the challenges and successes of the EU and its cultural policy in Algeria.

- i. **EU Civil Society Support** to Algerian Cultural Organisations, and the role of cultural associations implementing EU programmes

Between 2004 and 2010, the EU launched two civil society support programmes, for a total budget of €15 million. Small in comparison to the EU's financial support to other sectors such as health or education, these programmes supported hundreds of associations, including a number of independent cultural actors, where the Algerian state, and the Ministry of Culture (MOC), had previously been absent.

The objectives of the civil society programmes were to promote the role of Algerian civil society in development processes in Algeria. They aimed to improve the functioning of associations by providing small grants, by supporting networks of associations, by helping clarify the institutional context for associations and by training institutional actors. In the first programme, 76 small grants were accorded of which many focused on the arts, including for the following organisations:

- a) Association Bel Horizon in Oran launched their school to train heritage guides. They restored the Santa Cruz area, the mountain dominating the city of Oran. This had been a zone, completely off limits during the period of terrorism, throughout the 1990s. With the help of the local population and the authorities, the association ensured that the area was now once again a secure open public space. The association worked to inform Oran's citizens about the cultural wealth and heritage of the city through days to promote local heritage, the restoration of local historical buildings and working with the authorities and other charities to promote the Jewish, Ottoman, Spanish, French, Arab, Muslim heritage in the

city. The association has since gone from strength to strength, with 20,000 people participating in their annual 31st May walk in 2011, to thousands in the urban city walk with the presence of the puppets in 2015.

- b) Maïssa Bey, one of Algeria's celebrated contemporary writers, equipped and launched a dynamic new library for children in Sidi Bel Abbess, through the women's association she presides, Parole et Ecriture.
- c) The Petit Lecteur in Oran, active since 1993, with mobile libraries for schools and disadvantaged districts, created a space for reading, literary creation, and events based around books (such as festivals and writing competitions). The association edited two children's books in Arabic, as a result of one of their local writing competitions.

In the second programme, went much further. 129 small grants supported associations across Algeria of which 15 targeted heritage and 24 cultural projects. These included organisations such as :

- a) The Association Abou Ishak Ibrahimi in Ghardaia, in the M'Zab region of Algeria. This association set up a project to protect, digitalize and archive over a thousand historic manuscripts in the Ibadite region of Algeria. Storing the texts of historical, cultural and religious importance in the regional library, the association sought to promote greater understanding of their importance through workshops about the documents and through training in preservation techniques.
- b) In Tizi Ouzou, the association Aghbalou, launched a project to organise a training programme in theatrical production, to promote the theatrical arts and Kabyle culture in a zone with limited cultural infrastructure and opportunities. Targeting young people and other associations, the organisation launched training in technical expertise (lighting and sound) script writing, set design and drama classes. Active at the local level since the 1990s, the theatre group continues to participate in and organise national theatrical productions.
- c) In Chlef, the Association Castellum Tingitanum created a database of local heritage, identifying and classifying new sites. The organisation set up a physical space and online website identifying sites, collecting all historical documentation for the region, informing the authorities about the importance of the sites and their protection, and educating young people about the historic sites and the history of Algeria, from the Phoenicians and Romans through to the present day.
- d) In Oran, the Alloula Foundation, which commemorates the famous Algerian playwright assassinated during the decade of violence, used the EU funding to set up a Theatrical Archive and Documentation centre. With the local town hall, a centre was equipped with a

library of theatrical works, an online network of theatrical organisations internationally, and an archive of Alloula's works, written and filmed productions, for the local population and researchers.

Whilst these were periodic interventions into the cultural sector, the experience of managing a grant and a creative initiative was nonetheless formative for the actors involved. And a number of the projects had wide impact within the communities they serve, promoting culture at the grass roots level, rather than just the high culture supported by the state institutions. External evaluations and the associations themselves confirm the success and contribution of this EU support to Algerian cultural life and the independent sector. Culture was one of the predominant themes of the projects chosen by the associations (18%). This also led to a specific 'heritage support programme' to follow on from this civil society programme.

ii. Festivals

The second way in which the EU has intervened in the cultural sector is through festivals. Through copying the Algerian model of 'institutionalising annual festivals,' the EU has become recognised as an actor in the cultural sector through an even smaller financial commitment than the programmes discussed above. Able to provide high quality cultural entertainment in the capital, of international standard (through inviting mainly European or diaspora musicians to its annual European Festival) the European Union is now recognised as a cultural actor in Algeria. High level performances, which began during a period when there was a dearth of quality cultural performances in the country, struck a note with the population, and every event is traditionally a sell-out (albeit with free entrance, with the MOC providing rooms). Kessab writes that this cooperation is *the only visible cooperation* between the Ministry and the EU. It is however a significantly visible one, and other related cultural events also do attract some press interest and positive feedback from Algerian artists and writers, in particular those who bridge the divide of the Mediterranean, living between France and Algeria.

The sixth Euro-Magreb Writers festival took place in 2014 in cooperation with the authorities in the National Library, prior to the Salon International du Livre en Algérie,(SILA) The Algiers International Book Fair, at which the EU was invited by the Ministry to hold a stand. A Euro-Algerian photo residency was held in 2015 in Constantine, supporting the Algerian government's events celebrating Constantine, as the Arab City of Culture.

On its website the Delegation is thus able to pride itself on having placed culture at the centre of its activities – even this is financially a small fraction of its activities, and a tiny fraction of cultural spending in Algeria. Equally for the Algerian authorities, successful actions organised by the EU are welcome, as long as the Ministry is recognised and involved, and they maintain the central role in the list of credits.

iii. **Technical Assistance** – Heritage Programme, Research (Kessab) and regional programmes for culture

More recently, through developing technical training in its regional and national heritage support programmes, and through research into the cultural sector, such as Kessab's report, the EU has, at a low level, continued to support heritage protection and to create jobs in the sector. Recent discussions with EU civil servants indicate teething problems with these programmes. Active regional programmes such as Med Media supporting the Mediterranean broadcasting industry, seem to have a limited presence in Algeria. The heritage programme, with a budget of €21 million has no website, and only recently launched its call for associations, who have expressed some frustrations with delays in launching of this programme.

It remains to be seen how successful the EU's most recent programme might be, although its base within the Algerian Ministry of Culture and statements from the new Minister of Culture since 2014 of the need to open up the cultural sector to civil society and the private sector seem to indicate a more promising context.

3 Challenges

So what are the main challenges for the EU and Algeria in their cultural cooperation? Algerians face a number of challenges in defining and developing their cultural sector. These include issues such as language policy, foreign policy, dealing with international partners and engaging new independent actors.

Language policy has been difficult since 1962, with a largely francophone population, and many national languages. Arabic is the national language, but in the cultural domain, Berber, French, and

Algerian Arabic are all important means of expression. The fixation with imposing Arabic and rejecting French has in many ways provided further barriers for many cultural actors.

Rejecting the EU and European partners also is part of this complex relationship with the French language and cultural identity in Algeria. Algeria's diversified foreign policy takes it towards the Chinese, Arab, Africa, South American partners. The EU with its often bureaucratic, rigid approaches has been a challenging partner for Algeria. Over the years, from the EMP to ENP it has become an even more difficult partner, going from positive to negative conditionality, increasingly benchmarking and giving support to Israel has compromised its position as a neutral broker in the region – Del Sarto, 2005).

Increasingly, Algerian state actors are recognising that independent actors from civil society and the private sector, clearly are now able to promote diverse elements of Algerian culture and provide interesting jobs, opportunities and training for significant numbers of the population. The fact that only 0.2% of the culture budget is given to the independent sector remains a formidable challenge to overcome.

4 Successes

Whilst these present challenges, ultimately the situation for the cultural sector, and EU – Algerian relations, seem to have vastly improved from the in-existent partnership a decade ago. Civil society has strengthened and professionalized, constructive relations with the MOC have been developed through technical support. There is increasing dialogue and research lead by Algerian experts financed by the EU on how to manage cultural heritage. The resulting reports on the cultural sector have produced a clear analysis of some of the gaps and challenges which the ministry and different actors can engage with. The difficulties of dealing with the devastating impacts of the violence of the 1990s, particularly for the cultural sector, should not be underestimated, nor should the efforts of individual foundations and associations discussed above.

Conclusions

It seems then that the EU has managed to engage with the cultural sector in Algeria, at a modest but substantive level, despite all the limitations. The cultural organisations it has financed over the last decade have continued to operate and build up their expertise. The EU has managed to engage with the independent sector where the MOC has previously not been, but the EU has not yet managed to

transfer such practices or financing models to the national ministries (dealing with culture, civil society or social affairs) as despite the MOC's huge budgets, independent associations remain unfunded and mistrusted by state actors.

A quiet diplomacy with limited support to independent cultural actors albeit engaging with the ministries and improving relations between state and civil society, will enable the EU to continue in the cultural domain with hopefully positive impacts.

Developing the arts on both sides of the Mediterranean, improving the funding mechanisms (such as Creative Europe) which promote exchanges and intercultural dialogue for both sides will help this process. Algerian artists need to be able to travel, as European artists do, and greater mobility and a fairer visa regime will improve our cultural cooperation and diplomatic relations and quality of life on all sides of the Mediterranean.

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<http://www.castellum-tingitanum.org/> ; <http://www.oran-belhorizon.com/> ;
<http://www.jeunessedalgerie.com/article.php?id=5333> (Association Aghbalou) ; www.petitlecteur-oran.org