

Housing the *harkis*: long-term segregation

Abderahmen Moumen

The end of the Algerian War saw the arrival en masse of thousands of pieds-noirs¹ and harkis in mainland France. From the camps of the 1960s to the estates where these repatriated populations were housed until the 1980s, the fate decided for the second of these groups by the “homeland” was one of sustainable segregation.

The arrival of returnees from Algeria in 1962 – the year of its independence – represented a demographic upheaval in France, then in the middle of its postwar boom. Algerians who fought as auxiliaries in the French army were subject to a strict migration policy in a context of violence, but those of them who were able to leave Algeria did so in order to take refuge in France, sometimes accompanied by their families. Nearly 90,000 people took refuge in France via the French army, semi-clandestine channels or economic immigration throughout the 1960s. Thus began the construction of the identity of this social group, which was now designated by the generic term *harkis* (Besnaci-Lancou and Moumen 2008).

The *harkis* were not the only ones to migrate to France at this time, and the authorities made a distinction in their treatment of different populations from Algeria, in terms of the welcome they received, and the professional redeployment options and housing they were offered. This article aims to clarify the factors that led to the implementation of a specific, differentiated treatment for these former auxiliaries and their families in the form of transit camps. Public rehousing policies concerning this population group – whose situation was closer to that of refugees than of returnees – were very much in keeping with former colonial practices, with the establishment of a hierarchy of populations from Algeria. Finally, we will question the workings of a policy of regroupment and isolation, emphasising the social malaise of the families concerned.

Camps for “Muslim refugees”

Specific reception structures, in the form of transit and redeployment camps, were created and devoted exclusively to former auxiliaries and their families. Bourg-Lastic, in the Puy-de-Dôme *département* of central France, and the Larzac camp, in the Aveyron *département* further south, opened their doors from the end of June 1962 until October of the same year. These camps were rapidly saturated by the continual influx of population as a result of the violence in Algeria that was reaching its peak at this time: in July 1962, they accommodated more than 11,000 people. The public authorities decided to transfer these families to other camps in southern France, such as Rivesaltes in the Pyrénées-Orientales *département*, Saint-Maurice-l’Ardoise in the Gard *département* and Bias in the Lot-et-Garonne *département*. Almost 42,000 people passed through one of these camps between September 1962 and December 1964, while over 40,000 others managed to avoid them, settling all over France, often through acquaintanceship networks.

¹ Translator’s note: *pied-noir* (plural: *pieds-noirs*) is an informal term for Europeans who settled in Algeria when it was a French colony.

The Rivesaltes camp was at the epicentre of the special accommodation structures put in place by the authorities, with nearly 22,000 people passing through its gates between September 1962 and 31 December 1964, the date when it closed. This camp had the somewhat dubious distinction of having already been used earlier in the 20th century for the confinement and control of populations, in different conditions and contexts: a military camp for colonial troops (1938–1947), a refugee camp for Spanish Republicans (1939–1941), an internment camp for Jews and Roma (1941–1944), a detention centre for prisoners from the FLN (National Liberation Front) in 1962, and finally a camp for *harkis* (1962–1964).

The families who passed through the Rivesaltes camp were subject to military supervision and the administrative management of the ministry for repatriated populations, and faced precarious living conditions, being housed in tents and later in huts. Of these families, some stayed a few days while others remained for many years.

The *harkis* were gradually redeployed throughout France, especially in the mining, iron and steel industries of northern and eastern France and the ONF (National Forestry Office) logging camps of southern France. In late 1964, the remaining families (widows, large families, disabled people, etc.), considered “lost causes” by the administration, were sent to the camp at Saint-Maurice-l’Ardoise, which had been turned into a “reception estate” (Moumen 2008).

These specific accommodation structures can only be explained by the political and colonial context. A transposition of colonial practices from Algeria to France occurred for these families, who, with independence, lost their French nationality. These former “French Muslims” who had personal civil status under local law had to make a declaration recognising French nationality in order to be reintegrated into the French nation, which contradicted earlier statements accompanying the Évian Accords (Scioldo-Zürcher 2011, p. 93). They were also subject to military supervision both during their transfer to France and in the transit camps, and indeed right until they reached their redeployment location; this perpetuated the distrust with which they were regarded during the Algerian War. Finally, the context of violence at the end of the war, marked in particular by the attacks perpetrated by the OAS (Secret Army Organisation), further exacerbated the monitoring of the *harkis*, who were suspected of being FLN recruitment targets.

Refugees rather than returnees; monitored rather than welcomed; suspected rather than esteemed: such assessments had a real impact on rehousing decisions, which were subsequently endorsed by the public authorities during the massive influx of these families.

Hierarchy of population groups and segregation through housing

These representations of *harkis* ultimately formed part of the differentiated management of these populations retreating from Algeria, “in the tradition of unequal treatment, institutionalised by colonisation, between ‘French people of North African origin’ and ‘French people of European origin’” (Charbit 2006, p. 60). Upon the arrival of returnees from Algeria, the government made a distinction between different groups, creating a hierarchy of populations: Europeans from Algeria were unequivocally considered returnees; French Muslim dignitaries were given priority over former auxiliaries; and former auxiliaries were subject to social control but given priority over other Algerian migrants.

This differentiation was a direct consequence of the notion held by those in power – in line with the colonial imagination – that these people yearned for a community-based life. The fear of any incidents that could lead to “Europeans” and “Muslims” living side by side confirmed the decision to enact such spatial segregation, justified by the supposed incompatibility of their respective sociocultural systems.² Thus, in addition to transit camps, forest hamlets and other types of temporary housing (e.g. disused prisons, as in Cognac or Nantes), special shelters for the families of

² Centre des Archives Contemporaines (CAC) 19920149/1. Note to the prefect on the accommodation of Muslim returnees, 29 January 1964.

former auxiliaries were created, such as the accommodation centre on Boulevard d'Anjou in Marseille (closed on 20 December 1963). The *pieds-noirs*, on the other hand, passed through different structures and different requisitioned sites.

Upon the arrival of “Muslim dignitaries” (elected officials, civil servants, *caids* and *bachaghas*³) in France, local authorities at *département* level were instructed to consider and welcome them in the same way as Europeans from Algeria. Consequently, when Muslim dignitaries disembarked at Toulon on 7 July 1962, this difference with respect to the auxiliaries was underlined: they were “‘Muslims of quality’ to be treated exactly like Europeans”.⁴ In other situations, it was not uncommon to find references in official letters such as the following: “they were not *harkis*, but ‘dignitaries’ [emphasised in the letter], who should under no circumstances be directed to the Larzac camp, intended for *harkis* only”, but who could instead be driven to the La Rye camp, which was “adapted to welcome Muslims of a higher class than the *harkis*”.⁵

Finally, when the families of former auxiliaries were redeployed from the transit camps of Rivesaltes and Saint-Maurice-l'Ardoise – many of them to the industrial centres of northern and eastern France or to SNCF⁶ rail work sites (in Alsace and Lorraine) – they were grouped together in dedicated housing. The separation of “*harkis*” from “Algerian immigrants” sought to avoid tensions and reprisals.

However, this hierarchy continued well beyond 1962. The differences in treatment between Europeans from Algeria and former auxiliaries concerned housing in particular: François Missoffe, the minister responsible for returnees, requested, in a letter to all prefects dated 31 January 1964, that priority be given to housing *pieds-noirs* at the expense of former auxiliaries, under the pretext that the latter benefited from specific procedures:

“You shall only rehouse the former *harkis* once all returnees who have requested housing and are particularly poorly housed have been accommodated. Consequently, absolute priority must be given to returnees over former *harkis* for the allocation of public housing units intended for returnees.”⁷

Ending the exceptions: a slow process

Thereafter, though the majority of former auxiliaries' families ended up integrated into mixed areas (essentially in the north of France, Paris, north-eastern France, around Lyon and Grenoble, and on the Mediterranean coast), others remained, sometimes for decades, in segregated spaces – veritable “Indian reservations” (Abi Samra and Finas 1987). Several thousand families, considered to be “lost causes” (because physically disabled, injured, unfit to work, widowed or orphaned), unadaptable, even unassimilable, and who required, in the authorities' view, a transition phase before immersion in French society, thus remained banished to the sidelines in places of true social relegation.

This segregation took many forms: there were two “reception estates” with a disciplinary vocation in Bias and Saint-Maurice-l'Ardoise, containing nearly 2,000 people; 75 forest villages in rural areas mainly located in Languedoc-Roussillon, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur and Corsica, with an average of 25 families per village, governed by special regulations; 42 urban estates, such as the Cité des Tilleuls in Marseille and the Cité des Oliviers in Narbonne, for those considered more “advanced”; and lastly, apartments were reserved for former auxiliaries in the “*harki* programme” organised jointly by Sonacotra⁸ and SNCF. For many years, this housing policy was accompanied by very real social controls, enacted by successive supervisory bodies – managed by administrations

³ Colonial auxiliaries whose titles date back to the Ottoman period.

⁴ CAC 19910467/1. Letter from the sub-prefect of Toulon to the prefect of the Var *département*, 9 July 1962.

⁵ CAC 19910467/1. Letter from the prefect of the Var *département* to the interior minister, 10 July 1962.

⁶ Translator's note: SNCF (Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Français) is the national rail operator in France.

⁷ Archives départementales du Vaucluse 176 W 594.

dedicated more often to migrants than to returnees (Pitti, 2010) – from the SFIM (Reception and Redeployment Service for the French of Indochina and French Muslims) in 1962 to ONASEC (National Office for Social, Educational and Cultural Action) in 1982, via the BIAC (Information, Assistance and Advice Bureaux for French Muslims) in 1975 and the National Delegation for Social, Educational and Cultural Action in 1981.

The Saint-Maurice-l'Ardoise site was finally closed down – and the families residing there dispersed – in December 1976, following revolts in 1975. The camp at Bias, on the other hand, was renovated a few years later, but the site remained geographically and socially marginalised. The logging hamlets were progressively closed and renovated. In 1981, according to the departments responsible for *harkis* in each prefecture, some 28,500 people, or 3,560 families, were still living in 23 operational or former logging hamlets and 42 urban estates.

It was only after the revolts of 1991, which affected all regions of France, that the social difficulties of this population group, now known as the “second generation”, were taken into account. These revolts, which started on the Cité des Oliviers estate in Narbonne, resulted from the combination of a social situation linked to what was known at the time as “suburban sickness” (equivalent to inner-city dysfunction in Anglo-Saxon cities) with the legacy of a lasting historical trauma. Estates such as the Cité Monclar in Avignon, Le Pigeonnier in Amiens, the Cité Paloumet–Astor in Bias, the Logis d'Anne in Jouques (near Aix-en-Provence) and many other areas with concentrations of Algerian immigrants also experienced heated protests (Pierret 2010).

Revolts and negotiations with the authorities eventually resulted in a public policy concerning specific housing for “families of former auxiliaries and assimilated personnel”. The various laws that mark the history of the *harki* social group (in 1975, 1982, 1987, 1994 and 2005), which generally followed episodes of increased tensions, are indicative of this social malaise. With regard to housing subsidies, *harkis* are – once again – placed outside the common law. They benefit from exceptional measures, justified by the damage caused by their relocation and loss of Algerian land: home-ownership assistance, home-improvement allowances and debt-reduction allowances resulting from a home-ownership assistance operation. Support measures established in 1994 to help *harkis* acquire their primary residence, which concern only former auxiliaries or their wives, and not their children, have enabled many of them to become homeowners through financial assistance amounting to 80,000 francs (€12,000).

Almost 42,000 people from families of former auxiliaries, deemed to be different from other returnees, subject to suspicion and supervision in the first months of their transfer to France, were immediately placed in camps – transitional spaces for a population perceived as poorly adapted to French society. Of these, a significant minority remained in segregated spaces, where, in addition, they were subject to special social controls. This situation only ended with the revolts that shook the reception estates, urban estates and logging hamlets that were home to the *harkis* from the 1970s to the 1990s. Ultimately, this housing policy reflected the difficulties involved in identifying and defining this population that was not quite repatriated, nor perceived as French, and not comparable to ordinary migrants either. It also revealed a political willingness to use housing for ideological ends – a legacy of the colonial era. Concentrated, isolated, community-based housing such as this became the transitional and educational space described above, the implicit logic of which was the assimilationist model.

⁸ Translator's note: Sonacotral (Société National de Construction pour les Travailleurs Algériens) was a national company that built housing for Algerian immigrant workers. After 1962, the company's remit was extended to all foreign migrants and its name changed to Sonacotra (Société National de Construction pour les Travailleurs).

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Abderahmen Moumen holds a doctorate in history from the Université de Provence; the thesis he defended was on the subject of repatriated populations from Algeria in the lower Rhône Valley (2006). He is an associate researcher at the CRHiSM (Centre de Recherches Historiques sur les Sociétés Méditerranéennes – Centre for Historical Research into Mediterranean Societies; attached to the Université de Perpignan) and lectures on the history of immigration at the Université Lyon-2. He is also the historical research coordinator at the Musée Mémorial du Camp de Rivesaltes (Rivesaltes Camp Memorial Museum) near Perpignan.

His research concerns the history of peoples in Algeria, the Algerian War and migratory movements between Algeria and France (and, in particular, politically motivated migrations). He takes a particular interest in the museographical processes employed in the transmission of history. His publications include *Les Harkis* (2008), released by Le Cavalier Bleu in its "Idées reçues" collection.

To quote this article:

Abderahmen Moumen & translated by Oliver Waine, "Housing the *harkis*: long-term segregation", *Metropolitics*, 4 April 2012. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Housing-the-harkis-long-term.html>.