

France is in Flames: Centuries of Silence Finally Broken

On June 27th 2023, 17-year-old Nahel Merzouk was fatally shot by a French Police Officer during a traffic stop. There has been controversy surrounding the nature of the incident, with different rumors circulating around social media. Nevertheless, one thing remains certain: No matter what Nahel did or didn't do, absolutely nothing justifies the killing of a 17 year old boy.

Nahel's friend, who was with him in the car, has released an audio recording to "establish the truth". He claims that neither he nor Nahel were under the influence of any drugs, and that they immediately pulled over after they noticed the police were following them since they were on a bus lane on Avenue Joliot Curies. Although Nahel fully complied with the instructions of the officers, one said "cut the engine or I'll shoot" and then proceeded to hit Nahel with the butt of his gun multiple times. Because the car wasn't in park mode after the third strike his foot released the brake pedal and the car moved, with the officer in the front shooting him fatally in the chest.

Of course, the officers at the scene completely deny this, and have asserted that Nahel was in fact trying to escape. Furthermore, they claim that it took a chase in order to get Nahel to pull over. A GofundMe has been started for the officer charged with murdering Nahel, which has raised over 1.5 million dollars as of July 4th (Masih).

What began as peaceful street marches led by Nahel's mother across Nanterre, has now led to violent riots across France. Protestors, who are reportedly often quite young, set fire to police stations, cars, town halls, and schools. Over 40,000 police officers have been deployed in order to control the violence, and President Macron has even been asked to declare France to be in a state of emergency. While Macron has labeled the protests as "an unacceptable manipulation of the death of a teenager" others disagree. There is discourse regarding whether such a reaction to police brutality is appropriate or not, and a majority of those observing both inside and outside of France cannot help but wonder "how could one death prompt such outrage?" Well, the answer, like the situation itself, is quite complicated and involves taking a closer look at the role racism plays.

While many news outlets have covered Nahel's death, the mainstream media often fails to accentuate this key detail: Nahel was an Algerian Moroccan.

Since the French first arrived on the shores of Algiers in the late 19th century, making Algerians second class citizens in their own country for over a century, the wounds of colonization have never fully healed. Its independence war was one of the bloodiest in history, with Algerian authorities estimating that over 1.5 million Algerian lives were lost. To demoralize the opponent, the French would often rape and torture women and children, with the most famous case being Djamilia Bouhired. When Algerians tried to peacefully protest such brutality in Paris, hundreds were tied up and thrown into the Seine River, including 15-year-old Fatima Beda (Rouaba). In return, France to this day continues to deny their bloody legacy in Algeria and attempts to minimize the number of casualties of the Independence war. In fact, to this day France has never issued a formal apology to Algeria and has paid no reparations for the

unimaginable damage it has inflicted upon millions. The struggle for independence wasn't even recognized as a conflict until 1999 despite the fact that the war was over in 1962. Before President Macron, currently in power, no French President had ever publicly acknowledged the need to mend relations between Algerians and the French.

Despite such animosity between the two nations, millions of Algerians have lived and continue to live in France since the early 20th century. France itself had encouraged this immigration as they required a work force to operate the factories as the country continued to industrialize rapidly. While Algerians keep striving to reach France in search of employment, the systematic racism against Algerians and North Africans in general remains ubiquitous throughout the country. According to France's own human rights ombudsperson, as of 2020 black and arab people are 20 times more likely to be questioned by the police (Al Jazeera). Such statistics barely begin to scratch the surface as sociological studies continue to find discrimination in finding jobs, and even housing for those of Algerian or Arab descent. It is no secret amongst Algerians that getting employed as an Algerian living in France is nearly impossible, and now some are turning to the UK in hopes of a better life (Ramdani). France even targets the religious freedom of Algerians, with the infamous scandal regarding laws limiting a woman's right to veil making headlines. In truth, Algerians remain second class citizens in France in 2023. Sadly, the only thing special about the death of Nehel Merzouk, is that it is the first time the world has acknowledged the pain that French Algerians have been burdened with for far too long.

As France continues to struggle with the ongoing riots, the effectiveness of the violent tactics protestors are using remains unclear. While it undeniably demands global attention to the situation, one can only hope that going forward, France acknowledges its crimes in order to heal the wounds of history.

References

Fleming, Crystal M. "French Liberals Are Complicit in the Police Killing of Nahel." *Racism | Al Jazeera*, 1 July 2023, www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/6/30/french-police-killed-nahel-because-french-racism-enabled-it.

Masih, Niha. "Fundraiser for French Officer Who Killed Teen Raises over \$1.5 Million." *The Washington Post*, 4 July 2023, www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/07/04/france-police-killing-officer-gofundme/.

Rouaba, Ahmed. "How a Massacre of Algerians in Paris Was Covered Up." *BBC News*, 16 Oct. 2021, www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58927939.