

French Colonial Transformation of the Casbah of Algiers

Nicole Ma

Dr. Morgan Tufan

In the early 19th century, the British traveler William Shaler described Algiers as a city of tightly packed houses rising above the harbor, intersected by narrow streets that climbed toward the citadel. He described Algiers as rising “in amphitheatre” from the seashore, with narrow streets, terraced roofs, high walls, gates, and the Casaubas, or citadel, commanding the city (Shaler 47-48). He also noted the city’s well-kept mosques, bazars, market-places, and public buildings (Shaler 75). Such accounts portrayed Algiers as a thriving Ottoman port city, whose urban life was concentrated within its walled core, the Casbah.

By the mid-20th century, however, the Casbah had come to occupy a very different position. French officials and architects increasingly described it as an overcrowded and unsanitary indigenous quarter. Administrative reports, urban plans, and preservation schemes all treated the Casbah as a distinct space requiring intervention and regulation (Çelik 41-45). This leads to the central question: How did French colonial urban planning help turn the Casbah from the city’s old core into a marginalized indigenous quarter?

In this paper, I argue that this transformation occurred through three connected layers that, over time, redefined the Casbah’s urban space, social composition, and relationship to the rest of Algiers. The first layer was 19th-century legal and physical intervention. Through land seizure, expropriation procedures, street alignment, and property exchanges, French authorities altered the lower Casbah and inserted European infrastructure and commercial architecture. The second layer was the 20th-century colonial management of the Casbah as a distinct indigenous district, in which European construction, preservation schemes, redevelopment proposals, and forms of museumification increasingly treated the Casbah as a separate indigenous problem space. The third layer was wartime militarization during the Algerian War, when the Casbah became a controlled and occupied space. By tracing these three layers, I show how the segregated Casbah was actively produced as a colonial space through European intervention.

1. Nineteenth-Century Legal and Physical Intervention

1.1 Land Seizure and Expropriation Procedures

The first stage in the colonial transformation of the Casbah was the transfer of land into French control and the creation of expropriation procedures that made the old city available for intervention. Expropriation refers to the legal process by which a government takes private property for a declared public purpose. In colonial Algiers, French authorities had to work inside a dense precolonial urban framework, where urban infrastructure already existed within Ottoman and Islamic systems of property. As a result, the French had to take control of existing land and

create procedures that would allow them to intervene in the city. Hadjilah and Chérif explain that a European city could not simply be copied into Algiers because new construction had to be “integrated into the urban continuum inherited from the Ottoman period” (Hadjilah and Chérif 889). This constraint made property control and expropriation central to urban planning.

On October 17, 1833, the first legal order regarding expropriation was passed. It allowed authorities to remove buildings that obstructed alignment and enlargement projects or threatened public safety (Hadjilah and Chérif 892). Although, on the surface, it only allowed for the demolition of buildings that threatened public safety, “public safety” became used as justification for the French to further reorganize the Casbah. The April 2, 1834 decision then addressed what should happen to land left over after demolitions ordered for public utility, including state buildings, residual plots, concessions, and land that could be sold or retained (Hadjilah and Chérif 893). Later, the August 26, 1859 decree expanded the scope of expropriation beyond the narrow path of new streets, allowing wider zones of intervention (Hadjilah and Chérif 895).

Hadjilah and Chérif also stress that this appropriation was tied to military authority. Requisitions and demolitions were justified under the “war right” to protect the city (Hadjilah and Chérif 891). By framing it in the language of protection and necessity, what might otherwise have appeared as dispossession was presented by the colonizers as security. The legal category of public utility then became especially important because the transformation of the old street network and the opening of new streets were essentially based on declarations of public utility for expropriation.

Using these frameworks as justification, the French took control of many precolonial spaces. First, they seized Beylik buildings and other Ottoman government property. Second, they took over vacant and seized property managed by Beït-el-Mal, a precolonial administrative institution. Third, they recovered vacant property belonging to indigenous residents who had fled Algiers in 1830. Finally, they seized private property, or property dependent on corporations, that had previously been given as usufruct and managed through the habous or wakf administration (Hadjilah and Chérif 890-891). These seizures changed the Casbah from a city governed through precolonial and often Islamic institutions into a city whose land could increasingly be administered through French law.

1.2 Physical Remodeling in the Lower Casbah

Once French authorities established the legal tools for taking and redistributing property, those tools became visible in the physical form of the lower Casbah. The French concentrated in the lower city because it was closest to the port, gates, and main commercial routes. This unevenness is extremely important because it was central in dividing the old city from within, eventually creating an indigenous enclave in the upper Casbah.

The first major targets of French remodeling were the lower Casbah’s main streets: Rue Bab Azoun, Rue Bab el Oued, and Rue de la Marine. These streets connected the old city to the gates, the harbor, and Place du Gouvernement, making them especially important for military movement and commerce. The November 27, 1833 decision classified these streets as main roads, and expropriation allowed buildings along them to be partially or totally demolished for widening and

alignment (Hadjilah and Chérif 893, 904). This shows how the legal procedures discussed above became physical interventions in the urban environment.

This uneven transformation produced a lasting division. Çelik writes that by the mid-19th century, the lower part of the Casbah had acquired a more regular street network, with Rue de la Marine and Rue d'Orléans as main arteries. European settlers, including French, Italian, and Spanish residents, lived in this lower area, while the upper Casbah became an exclusively indigenous town (Çelik 35).

2. Twentieth-Century Planning: Separation, Preservation, and Reform

2.1 *European Algiers and the Visual Separation of the Casbah*

The Casbah's marginalization did not happen only through interventions inside the old city. It also happened through the construction of European Algiers around it. As French streets, arcades, and commercial districts expanded, the Casbah was increasingly defined by contrast in classic Orientalist logic. It was painted as irregular and messy compared to the regularity of the French district, indigenous rather than European, and crowded rather than open.

This division was reinforced visually by constructions along the edge between the Casbah and European Algiers. Çelik writes that the arcades and Boulevard de l'Impératrice created a "spectacular edge" to Algiers that "engraved the power relations of the colonial order onto the urban image." In her words, "the casbah was locked behind the solid rows of French structures" (Çelik 35). This is a useful way to understand the relationship between the Casbah and European Algiers: the European city framed and blocked the Casbah, making it appear as a separate indigenous space behind a colonial facade.

This developed the division already created in the 19th century. Earlier interventions had drawn the lower Casbah toward European settlement and commercial architecture. Later constructions reinforced the contrast between the regular, open, European city and the dense, irregular, indigenous Casbah behind it.

2.2 *Preservation as Regulation*

However, it would be an oversimplification to say that Europeans viewed the upper Casbah solely as a backward, less-developed space in a completely negative sense. The upper Casbah was often aestheticized by the Europeans as authentic and cultural. This view of the Casbah led to colonial planning not only transforming the Casbah by demolishing or regularizing many parts of it, but also by preserving it selectively, defining what counted as "authentic," and turning parts of the old city into heritage and touristic display. Preservation in this sense is therefore not the opposite of colonial intervention, but another way of managing the Casbah as a distinct indigenous space.

This preservationist logic was formalized in the early 1930s. A regulation dated June 13, 1931, aimed to conserve the "character and aesthetics" of the Casbah by requiring inhabitants to restore houses and build new ones according to "the proportions and characteristics of the indigenous architecture of Algiers," with the specific characteristics specified by French rather than indigenous planners (Çelik 41). Regulations like this made the inhabitants responsible for maintaining an official, European-defined image of the Casbah. The same policy created a commission to supervise the quarter, and Henri Prost, René Danger, and Maurice Rotival

incorporated preservation of the Casbah into the 1931 master plan for Algiers. In this way, preservation became a tool for the French to take even more control of urban planning, as the Casbah became regulated through rules about style, height, materials, and architectural appearance.

Le Corbusier, the French-Swiss modernist architect who proposed several plans for Algiers between 1931 and 1942, is another important example of this. He described the Casbah as “beautiful,” “charming,” and “adorable,” and insisted that it “never, no, never must be destroyed” (Çelik 42). However, his defense of the Casbah depended on reorganizing it. Le Corbusier argued that if Algiers was to become the capital of French Africa, the Casbah had to be “purified” and reorganized, and its population reduced. His proposal preserved the upper Casbah “in its integrity,” but only while restricting density and changing patterns of use. Some buildings would remain residences, while others would become arts-and-crafts centers intended to initiate an indigenous “renaissance.” In the lower Casbah, the “slums” would be cleared; only mansions would remain, but they would be converted into museums for indigenous arts (Çelik 42-43). This was technically preservation, but it was also selective clearance, population reduction, and museumification.



Figure 1. Le Corbusier, project for Algiers, photomontage, 1933 (Çelik 41)

Figure 1 makes the hierarchy of this project visible. The 1933 photomontage shows Le Corbusier’s business center in the foreground, connected to European residential areas on the hills by an elevated structure that forms a bridge over the Casbah. Le Corbusier described this artery as “separated entirely from the indigenous town, by means of a level difference” (Çelik 43). This created a “constant visual supervision over the local population” that marked the “hierarchical social order” of the colonial city, with the dominating above and the dominated below (Çelik 43). The Casbah was therefore preserved, but from a position of separation and oversight.

Overall, preservationist views did not simply protect the Casbah from destruction. It regulated the Casbah as an image of indigenous authenticity. French planners could admire the Casbah as cultural and historic while also reducing its population, changing its uses, and supervising its architectural form.

2.3 Material Consequences for the Indigenous Population

The separation and preservation policies had direct consequences for the indigenous population of the Casbah. Because colonial investment, street widening, commercial architecture, and European settlement concentrated in the lower city and around the waterfront, the upper Casbah became the main residential space for Algerian residents. These consequences were severe in terms of overpopulation and physical decline. In 1931, about 54,000 people lived in the upper Casbah, with nearly 3,000 inhabitants per hectare. By 1949, the population had risen to 64,000 people in only thirty-eight hectares, with some areas reaching 3,500 inhabitants per hectare. Housing conditions were “dreadful”: entire families were often “crammed into a single room,” and many houses lacked electricity or running water (Çelik 44).

In the early 1950s, overcrowding began to produce bidonvilles at the borders of the Casbah. Çelik describes these shantytowns as built from whatever materials were available, including reed, zinc sheets, and metal containers. Many rural migrants lived there in congested conditions, sometimes with more than ten people in a single shack (Çelik 45).

Thierry Guillopé’s study of housing policy in colonial Algeria helps explain why these conditions persisted. Guillopé argues that access to public housing was shaped by colonial hierarchy. Although low-cost and moderate-rent housing was not always officially reserved for Europeans, in practice it was much easier for Europeans to receive it. As he puts it, “it was better to be European and solvent” (Guillopé 2). Non-French speakers, single workers, and extended family units were often excluded from ordinary public housing, while Algerians were directed toward separate and often inferior categories of “indigenous housing” (Guillopé 2–4).

Guillopé also shows that colonial housing reform was never purely humanitarian. Public housing projects were presented as efforts to improve hygiene and living conditions, but he argues that they were also shaped by “security, control over urban inhabitants, and the standardization of city space” (Guillopé 4). E. Pasquali, an engineer in the municipal technical services, argued that tourists came to Algiers for the Casbah’s “sympathetic disorder,” and proposed converting the entire upper Casbah into a museum while removing its actual residents (Çelik 45). The Casbah was valuable as an aesthetic object, but its residents could be treated as obstacles to that value.

The same logic appeared in late-colonial housing reform. Guillopé notes that the Plan de Constantine, launched by de Gaulle in September 1958, proposed the construction of “222,000 dwellings” for one million people, but “fewer than half” were ultimately completed (Guillopé 8). More importantly, he argues that this housing investment was meant to “snuff out political unrest” among Algerians (Guillopé 8). In other words, housing reform was also a strategy of colonial stabilization. Even when the state promised to improve Algerian living conditions, it treated housing as a way to manage unrest, reshape social life, and preserve the colonial order.

3. Wartime Militarization

3.1 The Algerian War and Militarized Control

During the Algerian War, earlier forms of separation were transformed into direct military control. By the time of the war, the Casbah had already been separated, categorized, and made legible as an indigenous space, and wartime authorities then used that separation for military control.

Danielle Beaujon's account of segregation in Algiers helps explain this shift. She argues that, under French rule, "the Casbah stood as a metonymy for the Algerian population of Algiers" (Beaujon 43). Algerians were concentrated in the Casbah, while European settlement expanded through the rest of the city. This means that by the time of the Algerian War, military action in the Casbah went beyond merely attacking an FLN stronghold to attacking the most visible Algerian space in colonial Algiers. Militarization therefore reinforced the Casbah's status as an indigenous enclave by treating the entire district as a suspicious and controllable population zone. Henni's framework helps further explain this shift, as she argues that French colonial architecture during the war was tied to counterrevolutionary control. The French authorities reorganized territory and built settlements in order to isolate Algerians from revolutionary forces and prevent the spread of support for independence, or what the French army called "contamination." She calls these spatial strategies an "architecture of counterrevolution" (Henni 8).

This logic became especially clear when the French army physically sealed the Casbah off. During the Battle of Algiers, the French army "encircled the Casbah in barbed wire." She argues that French efforts to "cordon off Algerians from the larger city" were part of a military strategy of containing nationalism (Beaujon 59). This shows how military control deepened an older spatial division: the Casbah had already been separated from European Algiers through expropriation, uneven development, preservation, and overcrowding. During the war, that separation became material and coercive through barbed wire, blocked streets, controlled entrances, and military searches that turned the Casbah into a bounded Algerian zone.

This military occupation also changed the meaning of daily life inside the Casbah. Beaujon argues that the same segregated spaces that French officials saw as closed and difficult to control could become "zones of solidarity" for Algerians (Beaujon 44-45). Residents of the Casbah built networks that were hard for the French state to read or penetrate. In her words, the Casbah's "opacity" became a resource for resistance (Beaujon 59). The French army's response was to make this opacity visible and controllable through force: sealing exits, searching homes, wiring crossroads, and turning circulation itself into a matter of military supervision.

The Algerian War therefore made the Casbah more intensely indigenous in a spatial and political sense. Earlier colonial planning had already pushed Algerians into the upper Casbah and marked the district as separate from European Algiers. Militarization hardened that separation. By sealing the Casbah, controlling its entrances, searching its houses, and treating its residents as a suspect population, the French army turned an already marginalized indigenous quarter into a directly occupied Algerian zone.

4. Conclusion

The history of the Casbah under French rule shows that colonial urban planning was also a way of producing political and social separation. Through expropriation, street remodeling, preservation, housing reform, and militarization, French authorities repeatedly treated the Casbah as a space to be opened, categorized, aestheticized, corrected, and controlled. In the Casbah, colonial control also worked through selective preservation, visual framing, administrative reform, and claims of public utility or security. The old city was made into a separate indigenous quarter whose residents

could be displayed, managed, displaced, or policed. The Casbah's transformation therefore shows how urban planning can turn space itself into a tool of colonial rule.

Works Cited

- Beaujon, Danielle. "(Re)Building Algiers: Racial Segregation in the 'Republican' Empire." *Capture, Connect, Shift*, edited by Sabine Mohamed and Jatin Dua, Cultural Anthropology Open Book, 2026, pp. 42–65.
- Çelik, Zeynep. *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers under French Rule*. University of California Press, 1997.
- Guillopé, Thierry. "Homes, Interrupted - Housing Policies in Colonial Algeria." *NAQD*, nos. 38–39, 2021, pp. 15–32. Translated and edited by Cadenza Academic Translations. Cairn International. doi:10.3917/naqd.038.0015.
- Hadjilah, Asma, and Nabila Chérif. "The Casbah of Algiers's Transformation Between 1833 and 1859: Expropriation, Concession, and Plot Remodeling." *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2020, pp. 889–907. doi:10.1177/0096144219835158.
- Henni, Samia. *Architecture of Counterrevolution: The French Army in Northern Algeria*. gta Verlag, 2017.
- Shaler, William. *Sketches of Algiers, Political, Historical, and Civil*. Cummings, Hilliard, and Company, 1826.