



## **Italy's Defence of Algeria's Energy Sovereignty in the 1950s**

**Flavia De Lucia Lumeno**

Political, Legal and Sociological Sciences

Università degli Studi "Niccolò Cusano"

[flavia.delucialumeno@unicusano.it](mailto:flavia.delucialumeno@unicusano.it)

### **Introduction**

The causes and events of the Algerian War (1954-1962) have been studied worldwide (Ageron, 1990; Alleg, 1981; Courrière, 1971; Harbi and Stora, 2004; Horne, 2006; Stora 2004; Wall 2001). After years of French resistance, the arrival of General de Gaulle in 1958 opened up the possibility of greater openness to Algerian needs. Various proposals for integration into the French system were put forward. The war had depleted the country's resources and finances, but the most difficult sacrifice was the abandonment of oil exploitation, which was seen as an almost limitless source of wealth. From an Italian perspective, there are few authoritative studies on the position of this state in relation to the Algerian war (Ambasciata d'Italia, 2011a, 2011b; Bagnato, 2012; Calchi Novati & Roggero, 2018; De Lucia Lumeno, 2020). Moreover, none of them has focused exclusively on the oil and energy aspects of the conflict and their impact on international relations.

The aim of this study is to analyse the impact of the discovery of oil and gas fields in Algeria on the relationship between Italy and France in the 1950s. Specifically, it examines how Enrico Mattei, the president of Italy's main energy company, Eni, hardened Italian investment in Algeria as a result of the conflict. The paper identifies the political, economic and idealistic factors that influenced his resistance to French pressure for cooperation and investment in the exploitation of Algerian oil. Mattei's support for the cause of Algerian independence is also reflected in the gratitude shown to him by the political leaders of the People's Democratic Republic. Some recent outward signs were the dedication of a garden in Algiers to Mattei in 2021 and the posthumous award of the medal of Friend of the Algerian Revolution. The material

used in this work comes from the historical archives of Eni and some other important Italian institutional archives.

### **The first steps**

In the 1950s, the first studies of the Saharan oil fields produced positive results and aroused the interest of foreign investors. In May 1952, the French National Commission for Industrial Production reported that there were at least 200 applications for oil exploration in the Sahara. The Commission expressed concern about Washington's interest in the area (APa, 1952a). The applications covered large areas, some of which were far from the coast or the capital, making it difficult to control foreign exploration. The French, however, pointed out that the Americans' interest had to be justified by actual potential for profit. Otherwise, the willingness to invest large sums of money would be incomprehensible. The desert was a focal point for the Americans, the French and the Algerians. The Algerians wanted to divide it into three departments, while Paris preferred to monopolise the area by incorporating it into the French Union (APa, 1952b).

France's approach to oil was very different from its approach to other natural resources. In the case of coal and steel, it was prepared to distinguish (and separate) the European zone from the North African zone: for example, the applicability of the ECSC Executive Treaty was limited to the European territory of the contracting states so as not to favour trade from other countries. This limitation was seen as detrimental to Italian interests: 'On our side ... there is a tendency to try to extend the value of these agreements, particularly in economic terms, to the African territories of the powers concerned' (DGAP ufficio III, 1950). As far as oil was concerned, the French wanted to incorporate the Algerian departments into the metropolis in order to maintain control.

At the beginning of the 1950s, French companies had a *de facto* monopoly on the areas where oil exploration was permitted. In a telegram sent from Algiers to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 1953, Consul Messeri reported some important data. On the occasion of a visit to Algeria by the French Minister of Industry and Energy, Jean Marie Louval, the diplomat recalled that French oil exploration had been suspended since 1948 but had intensified at the beginning of 1952. Until

then, the area under exploration had been in the south of Algeria, in a vast stretch of the Sahara between Morocco and the Tunisian border. By then, Algeria had attracted the interest of the world's major oil companies, and France had granted drilling licences covering 650,000 square kilometres. In northern Algeria, the Société nationale de recherche et d'exploitation de pétrole en Algérie (SN REPAL), founded in 1946, was already producing around 300 tonnes of oil a day at Sidi Afssa, near Algiers, and surveys in other areas were yielding encouraging results. The company was also drilling for newly discovered gas on the Tunisian border.

Only a few foreign observers were granted access. However, Shell (Royal Dutch), for example, was increasingly hampered by the presence and actions of French companies as concrete prospects for exploitation emerged. According to Messeri, the US companies Caltex and Standard Oil were prominent among the world companies, duly supported by their government, which had posted one of its 11 vice-consuls in Algiers specifically in charge of oil (Consolato d'Italia Algeri, 1953a). However, France was irritated by the US position, which tended to treat Maghreb affairs as a single issue. France felt that Algeria was different from Morocco and Tunisia. The Quai d'Orsay made it clear that Algeria was and must remain an integral part of the metropolitan area (Consolato d'Italia Algeri, 1954).

In November 1954, the Algerian War of Liberation began, forcing France to commit considerable economic and military resources. However, the war did not go according to plan for the French and, despite prolonged operations, they were unable to defeat the Algerian rebels. The Algerian guerrillas knew the territory better and had the support of the local population.

In early 1956, France was forced to grant independence to Tunisia and Morocco, but French concerns and desires for Algeria remained unchanged: Algeria was part of the metropolitan territory of France. In November 1956, the Italian ambassador in Paris, Pietro Quaroni, noted that the French media were skilfully disseminating news of oil discoveries to offset the negative image of the country caused by its intervention in the Suez crisis. He also noted that the prospect of achieving economic independence in such an essential matter, the supply of which was particularly precarious at the time, served to justify, at least

in part, the heavy financial and human sacrifices that the North African situation demanded. In this case, the French press had reported the discovery of a large oil field in Hassi Messaoud containing one billion tonnes of crude oil. According to the French, this supply could easily have been transported to the sea by pipeline, although it started some 700 km south of the Algerian coast. The news was significant because it appeared on the same day that measures to reduce fuel consumption came into force in France. Quaroni argued that the news was used for a specific purpose, as evidenced by the contrast between the optimistic predictions of the Algerian general government (led by the Frenchman Robert Lacoste) and the more cautious estimates of the French oil companies investing in Algeria. The latter believed that it was impossible to provide reasonably accurate figures after only one initial survey (Ambasciata d'Italia Parigi, 1956b).

In May 1957, Caracciolo, counsellor at the Italian embassy in Paris, wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He pointed out that French domestic policy was aimed at exploiting African resources that were still in their potential state. This exploitation would allow the French budget to be balanced and the nation to live within its means without mortgaging its potential wealth, as had been the case until then. To achieve this goal, it was necessary first to solve the political problem of Algeria, then to find the necessary funds for the increasingly important investments in the overseas territories, and finally to have the necessary manpower to exploit these territories (APa, 1957a). According to Caracciolo, the French were very interested in this venture and were even prepared to accept Italian financial contributions and labour. It is worth noting that both Caracciolo, as financial adviser to the Italian Embassy, and General Giuseppe Mancinelli, Chief of the Defence Staff, were invited by their French counterparts to 'return to Africa'. For the counsellor, it was vital to support France, not only to benefit bilateral relations, but also to make the entire European Common Market develop. A French recovery, with the help of Italian participation, would be beneficial to the whole of Europe.

In August 1956, the Italian ambassador in Paris, Pietro Quaroni, had raised the issue of Saharan oil in the context of the Algerian question. He noted that the issue was growing in importance and had international repercussions. It also shaped French public opinion on the policy to be

adopted in Algeria (Ambasciata d'Italia Parigi, 1956a), because, by mid-1957, the rebellion had even begun to target wells, carry out sabotage and attack communications. One of these attacks was reported in 'Il Giorno', the newspaper that Eni's chairman, Enrico Mattei, had helped to save from bankruptcy a few months after its launch. The articles on Algeria caused great concern in France and it was widely believed in Paris that they reflected the views of the Eni chairman (Bagnato, 2011).

In November 1957, Quaroni reported on the negative impressions the French had of Algerian oil. These impressions were based on an article by the director Gaetano Baldacci, who stated that Algeria 'can only gain its independence for oil-related reasons'. The Italian ambassador noted that this position could also have jeopardised relations with Morocco, which was very sensitive to the Sahara issue. On the other hand, the French were also worried about foreigners who would undoubtedly be attracted by the prospect of oil. In addition to the restriction that foreign groups could not acquire a majority share in the concessions and had to make a real technical contribution, a condition was added: investments could only be made by countries that had pursued a 'policy of strict non-interference in France's relations with its overseas possessions' (APa, 1957b), i.e. had not taken sides in favour of Algerian independence.

### **The role of Eni**

In 1956, the Italian Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (Eni), which was at the height of its development and had a keen interest in North Africa, also began to study the possibilities of investing in Algeria. In September of that year, an internal memo reported on assessments made by the French engineer Giraud of the Compagnie Générale de Géophysique, which specialised in seismic and mining studies. The opportunities offered to Eni were in two areas that were perfectly compatible: exploration and drilling. With regard to the former, Giraud recalled that, according to the Mining Code, the foreign oil companies that had been granted exploration and exploitation concessions in Algeria in 1952 had to return 50% of the territory entrusted to them in 1957. In those few years, the companies had not been able to explore the entire area and it was possible that some areas rich in hydrocarbons had remained unexplored. Moreover, if Eni had been interested in these areas, it could

have carried out further analyses. If Eni did not have the means or the desire to request independent analysis of these areas, it could have collaborated with the transferee companies to continue exploration. Moreover, if it had continued with the drilling, in which it had previous experience, it could have obtained significant advantages, since the fees for these contracts were four times higher than those for the Italian ones.

In any case, a quick decision was needed as competition could intensify. Until then, only Royal Dutch Shell (still in partnership with the French) had permission to operate in the Algerian desert. However, American requests for permission were increasing, although they had not yet been granted. Giraud was ready to discuss the matter with Mattei himself. Eni's experts considered that - if the information uncovered was considered of interest - further investigations would still be necessary, not only because the climatic and environmental conditions in the Sahara were difficult, but also because there was a high percentage of barren or gas-only fields. (Direzione Estera, 1956).

In the months that followed, the company began to assess the true extent of Saharan oil resources and to explore the potential for cooperation with France. In February 1957, two technicians, Dante Jaboli and Luigi Scarpa, sent a detailed report to the managing director, Carlo Zanmatti, who passed it on to Eni's technical advisor, Attilio Jacoboni. Eni made initial contact with the Compagnie Européenne des Pétroles (Cep), which had applied for a concession to drill in the Adrar area and appeared to have no competitors in the area. The document states that the main objective was to assess the feasibility of a research collaboration with Cep. The experts stressed the importance of the existence of permeable zones. At present, only gas has been found in the geological layer where drilling is planned, but the possibility of finding oil cannot be ruled out. However, the actual size of the reservoir could not yet be determined, although it was expected to be substantial.

The Italians then met with Georges Schiff-Giorgini, the Franco-Italian president of Société Générale Foncière, a credit institution. Giorgini admitted that he had no technical knowledge and that he had contacted Eni (and, according to the testimony of the two geologists, the Fiat and Montecatini industries as well) on behalf of the Banque de Paris and only for political and financial purposes. The information does not

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seem to be secondary: it is likely that the "Banque de Paris" mentioned above was the Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas. The summary document of the 1958 annual general meeting of this bank, presenting the accounts for the 1957 financial year, contains numerous references both to the Algerian question and to oil investments (Banque de Paris et des Pays-Bas, 1958). Schiff-Giorgini's intervention, whether on behalf of this bank or another, demonstrated the interest of the French financial world in Italian involvement.

Although he lacked expertise in the oil field, he introduced them to the environment of the Compagnie financière de recherches pétrolières (Cofirep), a company that had small financial holdings in Saharan companies. The director of Cofirep did not add any relevant data. However, the two geologists pointed out that, of all the bodies concerned with the Sahara, the Bureau de Recherches de Pétrole (BRP) was probably the most reliable, as it carried out geological studies with its own staff (and was therefore not influenced by the oil companies, as the Italian technicians seemed to suggest) and produced confidential reports on the studies it had carried out. If investments in the Sahara were to be considered, Jaboli and Scarpa concluded, the collaboration with BRP would have to be taken into account.

The Italian engineers concluded that it was not yet possible to estimate the energy wealth that could be extracted from the Sahara: there would probably be more than just rich deposits, many of them of limited size. At present, there was no evidence that the Sahara could become a new Middle East. However, there were some interesting findings and positive indications of commercial production possibilities, as well as encouraging geological premises for further research (Direzione Estera, 1957). As we'll see, a year later Schiff-Giorgini wrote directly to Mattei to ask for a share in the field's exploitation.

The interest in Algerian oil was not limited to industry experts. The Italian political authorities were also considering the possibility of oil exploration in Algeria. In July 1957, Renzo di Carrobbio, the deputy director-general for economic affairs at the Italian foreign ministry, wrote to Enrico Mattei (Direttore Generale Aggiunto degli Affari Economici, 1957), the president of Eni, to inform him that foreign companies would be allowed to explore for oil in Algeria if they set up a subsidiary under ARAS, vol. 45, no. 2, June 2024

French law, with headquarters in the metropolitan area and a French capital participation of at least 50%.

The French embassy in Rome confirmed (as reported by Carrobio) that the French government would consider it advantageous for Italian companies to use the expertise of the Bureau de Recherches de Pétrole (BRP) in Paris to obtain all the necessary information (Ambassade de la République Française en Italie, 1957). Mattei's reply, as far as we know from the documents, was brief. He thanked him for the information but did not express any interest in pursuing the projects on which Carrobio was seeking an opinion (Mattei, 1957).

### **Mattei's ideal of freedom and the Algerian gratitude**

A skilled manager like Mattei, who was committed to securing energy sources for his country's survival, would undoubtedly have explored all possibilities. Moreover, as a shrewd politician, he could have exploited France's weakness and isolation to obtain the best concessions, while maintaining direct relations with state officials and influencing Italy's foreign policy. In the case of Algeria, however, Mattei was able to resist both pressing economic needs and political temptations. What was the reason for Mattei's reluctance to open a new investment area in North Africa after other successful experiments? Based on the available documents and the opinions of some scholars, it seems that Mattei's decision not to negotiate with France was justified by his intention to wait for Algeria's independence (Bagnato, 2004; Vangimigli, 2006; Pirani, 2011 and 2013). However, this attitude was not motivated by a desire to exploit the vulnerability of a young nation that could be Italy's ally rather than negotiate with a pretentious state with conflicting interests, as France was perceived at the time. Nor was it motivated by Mattei's hostility to France, but rather by his desire to secure every possible support for the people fighting for independence. Mattei himself had fought in the Resistance against Nazi Fascism and understood the sacrifices necessary for victory.

Certain that the liberation of Algeria would be achieved, Mattei was determined to negotiate only with the new leaders in order to support the Algerians in their efforts. An agreement with the French to exploit Algeria's oil resources would have strengthened their presence in the



Sahara, whereas Mattei was convinced that this territory belonged to the natives. Mario Pirani, his 'ambassador' in North Africa, stated that 'he had taken a very firm stand on the issue: it was therefore not a question of "oil", but first and foremost a question of independence' (Pirani, 2011).

In 1960, in Tunis, Mattei explained his position on colonialism, which he saw as a widespread 'mentality' not only in international relations but also in domestic contexts, as the imposition of a way of seeing in order to keep others subservient. In the Italian context, for example, he recalled the difficulties he himself had encountered in developing a national oil industry in the face of entrenched interests. In this context, he mentioned the Algerian war too:

I am here to answer your call for investment and to help you fight underdevelopment. I am not afraid of the Algerian war. I am not afraid of decolonisation. I believe in decolonisation not only for moral reasons of human dignity, but also for economic reasons of productivity. Without decolonisation, it is not possible to arouse in the Afro-Asian peoples the energies, the enthusiasm necessary for the valorisation of Africa and Asia. Now the wealth of Africa and Asia is immense. ... I, too, fought against the fixed idea that existed in my country: that Italy was condemned to poverty for lack of raw materials and energy sources. I identified these energy sources, gave them a value and extracted raw materials from them. But before I did all that, I also had to do some decolonisation, because many sectors of the Italian economy were colonised; I would even say that southern Italy itself was colonised by northern Italy! The colonial fact is not only political: it is also and above all economic. A colonial condition exists when there is a minimum of industrial infrastructure to process raw materials. A colonial condition exists when the interplay of supply and demand for a vital raw material is altered by a hegemonic power: even a private, monopoly or oligopoly power (Mattei, 1960).

In October 1961, at a meeting commemorating the resistance against Nazi-fascism, Mattei testified his stance against all forms of colonialism and prevarication:

Other countries yearn for freedom and justice, and we know that they suffer and die for them. That is why we share a broader

vision of human problems and relations, from the individual to the peoples. [...] But it requires the exclusion of any form of blackmail or intimidation and is not compatible with undue interference by economically stronger countries in the internal life of weaker ones. We must ensure that colonialism [...] does not persist or seek to survive under different but no less onerous forms. The forces of political immobility, allied to economic privilege, cry out against the spirit of rebellion of these peoples and join forces in an inexorable march towards independence and freedom. Economic paternalism is not very different from colonialism, less humiliating in its form for those subjected to it, but also the result of the blind selfishness of the strongest towards the weakest (Mattei, 1961a).

A few weeks later, the 'Le Monde' journalist Alain Murcier asked him: 'You have refused to invest in the Sahara until Algeria is independent. What would be your policy towards an Algerian government responsible for the future of its country?'. Mattei answered: 'One of your compatriots, who was to become Minister of Defence, called me a visionary when I told him that I believed Algeria would be independent and that your government would negotiate. I'm not a man of arms, I'm a pacifist. I want to work peacefully, and that's impossible in a country at war. Working with an independent government? Time will tell what this government will have in its hands' (Mattei, 1961b).

In February 1962, a few months before his death in a tragic plane crash on the eve of an important agreement to be signed with the government of independent Algeria, he was interviewed during a press conference at the Foreign Press Association. Many journalists, both Italian and foreign, asked him questions about his links with the then provisional Algerian government:

If we had a secret agreement with the Algerian government, I would say no. We made contact with the French government six years ago. On that occasion, the problem of working in the Sahara was put to us. The war had just broken out, and since we love peace, not war, we replied that we did not want to send our workers and technicians to work in the Sahara with machine guns at their feet, and that we would wait until the situation was clarified. The situation has not been resolved, but I see that after

six years it is the French government that is negotiating peace with the Algerian government. When everything is calm, we will be very happy to work in the Sahara. ... I believe that the wealth of the Sahara is impressive, but for the moment we have not examined the question of ENI's collaboration in the exploitation of the Sahara. We are waiting to see if it is possible to work and how. We are only interested in working and we believe that this action can make a significant contribution to Europe, which in turn can help Algeria to develop (Mattei, 1962).

As can be discerned, for Mattei, economic independence was a necessary condition for the realisation of political freedom. In this respect, his position aligned with that of the Algerian National Liberation Front, which in 1957 had already declared that it considered France's extended agreements with other countries for the exploitation of petroleum to be solely temporary:

We understand that the development of such an immense territory requires technical and financial means that not even France can provide, let alone a nation subject to foreign domination for more than 125 years ... However the Algerians intend to determine by themselves the conditions and modalities of these indispensable foreign contributions ... Only a free Algerian government will be entitled to approve such contracts and to grant concessions on the national territory. The foreign companies that have invested their capital in the Sahara and those who refer to the French government to obtain research permits are building on sand. We would like to emphasise that the contracts recently signed with France by foreign oil companies are, in fact, provisional. The Algerian people and their government are not bound by these wartime contracts and regard them as an act of hostility towards the Algerian people (Débats Parlementaires, 1962).

Mattei's support was not just an attitude that remained unfulfilled because of his death. On the Algerian side, the chairman of Eni is considered a true supporter of the revolution. In 2021, the President of the Republic, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, decided to award the Medal of the Friends of the Algerian Revolution to Enrico Mattei by Presidential ARAS, vol. 45, no. 2, June 2024

Decree No. 21-356 of 18 September 2021. This medal is awarded by the President of the Republic to foreign personalities who have given effective material and moral support to the national liberation struggle, as a sign of recognition on the part of Algeria.

Dahou Ould Kablia – a former collaborator of the Algerian Minister and founder of the Algerian intelligence secret services, Abdelhafid Boussouf, and president of the Association of MALG (Ministry of Armament and General Relations) Redoubts – argued that the French special services killed Enrico Mattei, ‘who was considered to have become the most formidable competitor of French interests in Algeria after independence’. He was one of the European friends ‘a hundred of whom paid with their lives for their active support of the Algerian revolution’ (Kablia 2011).

Ali Cherif Deroua, an ALN/MALG officer, described Mattei as 'extremely positive in his commitment and his material, diplomatic and political contribution to the Algerian revolution' (Deroua 2011). Laid Rebiga, Minister of Moudjahidine and Rightist Affairs of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, described Mattei as a ‘fighter who dedicated his life to just causes in the world, before whom we all bow today, before his soul with respect and consideration. ... Although he has left this world, Enrico Mattei remains one of the world's great personalities whose illustrious support for our national cause will remain engraved in the memory of the Algerian people and whose human values will continue to contribute to, encourage and support the liberation movements of peoples still suffering under the yoke of colonialism’ (Rebiga 2023).

### **The Italian government's interests and French pressure**

Although some Algerian observers (Kablia 2011; Rebiga 2023) believe that Mattei succeeded in steering Italian policy in favour of the Algerian cause, archive documents show that, at least in the early stages, he had the daunting task of resisting the explicit and implicit demands of the Italian government and French pressure. In May 1958, Ambassador Ugo Sola, President of the Commission Internationale pour l'Exploration Scientifique de la Méditerranée in Paris, telephoned Attilio Jacoboni, Eni's Assistant to the President for Foreign Relations, to say that a former ambassador, Jonel Somario, - 'head of a French financial group operating in Algeria' with 'an excellent introduction to French and Algerian oil and

official circles' - wanted to meet him, although this was not the most appropriate time to be dealing with Algeria (Direzione Estera, 1958a). In any case, there is no evidence of any follow-up to this note.

In July, the president of Société Générale Foncière (Sgf), the Franco-Italian Georges Schiff-Giorgini, whom two Eni geologists had met on an exploration trip the previous year, wrote to Mattei to invite him to participate in the construction of a refinery at Hassi Messaoud. The letter began with an introduction that could have political implications, perhaps to underline the importance of the request. Schiff-Giorgini noted that if Mattei did not know him, he could have asked for references from Armando Angelini, the Christian Democrat transport minister, the banker and economist Raffaele Mattioli or the Socialist MP Pietro Nenni. The Franco-Italian financier stated that a subsidiary of an SGF company, the Compagnie de Raffinage en Afrique du Nord (Cran), had signed agreements with Sn Repal for the construction of a 100,000-tonne refinery in Hassi Messaoud. The Algerian government had granted the company a 42-hectare concession for the plant. Schiff-Giorgini stressed that the refinery would cost one billion francs, but that financing was not an issue. Rather, the financier was looking for a group that could provide technical assistance and quickly procure the necessary equipment. The deal had the potential to bring 'significant benefits' and serve as an 'excellent observatory' of Saharan activity. It was also mentioned that Sn Repal intended to entrust Cran with the degasification of all its crude oil. To lend credibility to the deal, Schiff-Giorgini mentioned that Cran's president was General Koenig, a highly decorated veteran of the Second World War and a former French defence minister. According to the archives, it was the technical adviser Jacoboni who was instructed by President Mattei's secretariat to reply to Schiff-Giorgini's request. Jacoboni's reply was brief and straightforward, stating on Mattei's behalf that he could not accept the proposal 'because of the Group's commitments in the sector' (Direzione Estera, 1958b).

However, Mattei's position could have jeopardised relations between Italy and France. A file of confidential documents on Eni from the Senate of the Italian Republic, kept in the fund of the President of the Republic, Giovanni Gronchi, contains a study on Italian participation in the exploitation of the Sahara. The study, dated 16 October 1958, highlights the French reluctance to allow Italy to participate in the Algerian oil field after Eni had wrested an agreement with Morocco from France. French representatives explained that France's exclusion from ARAS, vol. 45, no. 2, June 2024

Morocco had strained relations between the two countries. The French therefore saw Italy's exclusion from the exploitation of the Sahara's oil resources as 'just retribution'.

By flattering their 'transalpine cousins', the Italians tried to convince them of the 'inappropriateness of pursuing a strictly nationalist policy when a loyal agreement with Italy, possibly extended to Spain, could have provided the financial and technical means to solve the problem'. Moreover, an agreement with Italy would have allowed the French to use their own oil machinery instead of relying on that of the United States. However, the French did not welcome this prospect. It is clear that there were high expectations of improved relations between the two countries, which necessarily involved Eni's participation.

After the talks, which were reported to President Gronchi, the Italian representatives were satisfied that they had obtained a commitment from the French to create an Italian-French company, with 49% Italian participation, which would be able to obtain concessions for the exploration and exploitation of oil in the richest areas, which would be selected in advance. The authors of the analysis envisaged that the majority of the shares could be returned to Italian hands by means of agreements with the French banks which, together with the oil companies, would have subscribed to the 51% package. Or rather, in Eni's hands: although Paris would have preferred to negotiate with a newly formed technical-financial group, Eni was finally accepted as a partner. In any case, national companies, workers, geologists and machinery would have been used for research, with great economic and knowledge benefits. But the agreement would not have been free for Italy. 'Not as a quid pro quo, but as part of the new relations it was ready to establish with Italy in this field', France would have welcomed reciprocity in Morocco, where the Italians would have been able to hand over 49% of the activities. In this way, economic relations between the two countries would have been strengthened and Paris would have had a justification for ceding its share of the Sahara on more favourable terms than usual. In addition, to reinforce the positive aspects of the agreement, the analysis stressed that this cooperation could have attracted other 'Latin' interlocutors, which President Gronchi was keen to do, as demonstrated by his recent trip to South America. Satisfied with the feasibility of the project, a deadline was even set: 7 December, when the National Assembly was to meet and approve the statutes of the Italo-French company (Senato 1958). The approval of Eni was necessary for the conclusion of the agreement.

However, there is no clear indication that the proposal was accepted by the company.

The French demands were made at a time when the repression of Algerian guerrilla warfare by the French had become systematic. This was due to the division of the country into sectors and the organisation of a relentless repressive system, as well as a system of border barriers. Initially, many villages were devastated and the population made to emigrate. Then the ALN strongholds were targeted. At the same time, the guerrillas specialised in ambushes and night raids, eliminating not only French soldiers and settlers, but also Algerians considered to be collaborators. The climate of terror was widespread in Algeria, so the attitude of the technicians who looked at the oil factor almost without taking into account the terrible circumstances was somewhat alienating.

A few months later, on 21 January 1959, the French oil company (Cfp), which had just signed an agreement with Standard Oil of New Jersey to participate in Saharan oil, also contacted Eni, which 'refused to enter Algeria, preferring to wait for peace', as Redha Malek, former head of government and spokesman for the Algerian delegation at the Evian negotiations, recalled in a testimony about Mattei. Malek believed that Mattei's assessment was correct, given that investing in Algeria involved considerable risks from both a prudential and a managerial point of view. Indeed, a few days after the CFP attempt, on 24 January 1959, a tanker train carrying thousands of litres of oil from Hassi Messaoud jumped a mine and burned for three days south of Constantine (Malek, 2011).

In any case, Mattei was keen to learn more about the extent of Algeria's potential. He was therefore attracted by the supply possibilities and remained interested in the value of Algeria's resources. Although he had declined Schiff-Giorgini's offer to participate in the development of the Hassi Messaoud field, Mattei was interested to find out how far work had progressed in December 1960, when some Agip geologists were invited to visit the field by colleagues from the *Compagnie française des pétroles Algérie*. Created in 1953, Cfpa, in which the French state held a 35% stake, had been in control of two fields since 1956, an oil field (Hassi Messaoud) and a gas field (Hassi R'Mel). The visit was prompted by an invitation from Cfpa's exploration director to Agip's technicians at the World Geological Congress in Copenhagen in August 1960. The visit was facilitated by the presence of Engineer Passegna, who was a consultant to both Agip and Cfpa, and took place over a period of about 10 days between late November and early December 1960.

According to the Italian geologists, the Hassi-Messaoud deposit was "sui generis". It covered an area of 1,700 square kilometres and there were 24 plants (12 by Cfpá and 12 by its subsidiary SN Repal), but the structure was so vast and the plants were so far apart that the area hardly seemed active. On the other hand, the industrial centre, where the crude oil was collected, the tanks and the power station were located, was - in the eyes of the Italians - 'truly imposing' and conveyed the importance of the field. In 1956, the two companies agreed to build a 24-inch pipeline between Hassi Messaoud and Bougie (now B ja a) on the Algerian coast. This pipeline facilitated the transport of 500,000 cubic metres of oil in 1958. At the time, reserves were estimated at 2.5 billion tonnes, of which 400 million tonnes were recoverable. The current facilities had a capacity of about 8 million tonnes per year, which could be increased to 9 million tonnes with improved technology. Crude oil was transported to Bougie and then sent by tanker to Algiers for refining.

With regard to the Hassi R'Mel gas fields, geological and geophysical data predicted reserves of 1980 billion cubic metres of natural gas and 310 million tonnes of gasoline, with a possible recovery rate of between 37.5% and 50%. However, no firm figures were given. Apart from some technical data indicating good potential, no conclusions were drawn from these fields (Agip, 1960). It is important to note that the oil and gas fields in the region are still very active. Six new discoveries were made at Hassi Messaoud in 2023, and Hassi R'Mel is currently the largest gas field in Africa.

## **Conclusion**

According to the material consulted and previous studies, there seems to have been considerable French interest in the 1950s in obtaining support for the exploration and exploitation of oil in the Sahara. Italy was the preferred choice, and during the Algerian War of Liberation it managed to maintain a commendable balance between loyalty to Western (Atlantic and European) commitments and national needs. After the Second World War, Italy was interested in securing energy supplies, building relations with the Arab world and completing the European integration project, in which France played a central role. The exploitation of Algerian oil could be seen as a confluence of these interests. The involvement of Eni, a hydrocarbon company founded in 1953 to supply Italy with energy resources, was a crucial factor.



However, Eni was run by Enrico Mattei, whose position on the issue of Saharan exploitation became clear when he refused to give in to Italian and French pressure. In his view, oil and gas deals could only be concluded with an independent Algeria. He had fought against Nazi Fascism in Italy and led the Resistance and chose to postpone negotiations with the future Algerian state in order to ensure a fair and equal discussion. Mattei's tactful refusals and deliberate pauses forced France and Italy to halt negotiations involving banks, companies, governments, presidents of the republics and parliaments.

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