

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL RESISTANCE THOUGHT IN ALGERIA AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *At the beginning of the twentieth century, Algeria, under French occupation, experienced significant intellectual, economic, and political changes. These shifts had a profound impact on Algerians, who faced increasing pressures and coercion. This situation led to the emergence of a form of militant resistance. Algerians were forced to adapt to these changes by taking into account various factors and variables that shaped their understanding of their circumstances and how to confront the reality of occupation. Several international and domestic factors contributed to the development of this new mindset. Global tensions were rising due to imperial expansion and colonialism. Additionally, the French colonial administration implemented reform measures from time to time, which influenced the Algerian response. For example, some Algerians were allowed to represent the country in parliament. French-Arab schools were also established, opening up educational opportunities. This, in turn, provided space for ideological growth and fostered movements advocating for change, freedom, and political development. As a result, a new sense of national consciousness began to take shape. This emerging awareness helped to form the foundation of a new militant discourse, which reflected the growing determination to resist colonial rule and pursue national liberation.*

Keywords: Intellectual, development, national struggle, national movement, ideology

1. Introduction

The global changes at the beginning of the twentieth century had a significant political, economic, and social impact on both colonized and colonizing nations. This period saw the rise of anti-racist ideologies such as fascism and Nazism, the growth of nationalist movements, and the redefinition of modern state-building concepts. In Algeria, these changes were reflected in its subjection to French laws, as well as its adoption of French economic, social, and urban systems.

Civilizational transformations were evident, especially in the political sphere. Signs of parliamentary and representative politics, rooted in the French system of governance, became clear. However, these developments were marked by contradictions, as they were grounded in racial discrimination and the "Frenchization" of key strategic positions. For instance, roles such as governors, judges, and municipal council presidents were exclusively reserved for the French, further entrenching inequality and exclusion.

In response to this, the Algerian resistance movement persisted, although it took on a new form. This time, resistance was expressed through participation in councils and the pursuit of social demands, all within the framework of a progressive libertarian ideology. In other words, elements of a socialist vision began to emerge in opposition to the liberal regime, which had gradually transformed Algerians into subjects of procedure since the early twentieth century, while the French settlers secured autonomy over Algeria's financial and civil affairs

The political and economic situation in early twentieth-century Algeria had a profound effect on Algerians, particularly as parents and citizens under French rule. Some Algerians managed to escape the harsh grip of the French government, partially due to reform measures introduced from time to time. These included allowing Algerians to represent themselves in parliament and the establishment of French-Arab schools, which opened up educational opportunities. This educational access contributed to the formation of movements advocating for change, as well as intellectual and political development. Furthermore, the introduction of print media played a crucial role in shaping public consciousness, advancing ideas of national identity, citizenship, and republicanism. These terms became central in the emerging militant discourse, signaling the modern development of the concept of sovereignty among the Algerian elite. This elite was composed of individuals who graduated from French schools and the reformist elite, grounded in religious traditions, who emerged from the mosques and zawiyas (religious schools).

This period marks a pivotal moment in defining Algeria's national intellectual framework for political action and struggle. The Algerian elite, both secular and religious, grappled with how to rebuild

militant thought and chart political horizons. These political challenges are addressed through a sociological reading of Algeria's national struggle movement from the early twentieth century onward. The systematic approach to analyzing and interpreting political reality during this decisive period helped determine the intellectual foundation of Algeria's national movement.

2. Challenges of Political Reality

2.1 National Militant Thought and Features of Libertarian Ideology

National militant thought in Algeria began to flourish during a time of rising ideologies opposed to racism, such as fascism and Nazism. Nationalist movements developed alongside liberal thought and modern bourgeois aspirations. These ideals were often expressed by "a small elite of young Algerians living in cities, educated and French" (Ageron, 1982: 112). This group embraced Enlightenment discourse, which promoted individual freedom and integration. Their demands for political equality reflected a liberal understanding of national political struggle, pushing for reforms within the framework of French Algeria. The French administration perceived these demands as part of a growing national movement against its authority, as they called for "the abolition of tax disparities, the spread of education, the expansion of political representation for Muslims, and an end to the system of civil dependency" (Ageron, 1982: 115).

While these demands adhered to Islamic values, they also expressed a desire for political organization rooted in parliamentary representation and the right to political participation. This aligned with the social contract theory, which aimed to consolidate modern intellectual ideas about political authority, in contrast to traditional Islamic values of allegiance and obedience to the sacred norms of the Imamate. These norms, inherited by the Islamic world, maintained a social hierarchy that excluded any notion of grassroots political participation. Instead, these relationships were built on loyalty, which formed the cultural and political foundation of Algerian society, especially in the *zawiyas* and rural areas.

As global and local events evolved, Enlightenment ideas advocating for individual rights and social values began to resonate with the Algerian youth elite. Although this ideological trend was established, it failed to mobilize the wider Algerian population into a mass movement capable of challenging colonial forces (Bouhouche, 1997: 206). Despite their demands—such as advocating for Algerian rights, reducing daily suffering, and urging the French administration to honor the terms of the social contract—the movement was limited in scope. Their publications, such as the newspaper *Al-Haq*, and their association meetings, highlighted the contradictions between the Enlightenment values promoted by France and the colonial injustices it practiced against Algerians.

Among their demands were "the abolition of the Andjana law, granting loans to farmers and traders, opening training centers for Algerians in industrial professions, and educating Muslim children" (Ageron, 1968), all of which reflected their desire for equality as citizens and active participants in the French government.

The Algerian youth elite, whose social affiliations had expanded, did not conceal their liberal aspirations. They emerged as a national intellectual force, playing a pivotal role in creating a rift between the authority of traditional leadership (like the Emirate and the Caliphate) and the modern parliamentary authority they sought through party and federal mechanisms. Their aim was to secure political positions and actively participate in governing the country. This competition for power can be understood through the lens of scientific theory about governance, which defends justice and strives for social balance. This legitimacy, driven by social necessity, could not be fully realized in French-occupied Algeria without embracing the cultural and ideological constants of the Algerian people, particularly the Islamic religion, which reinforced the awareness of political unity and national consciousness as part of an Islamic nation with its own distinct identity.

The Algerian youth leaders were keen to uphold Islamic principles, recognizing the importance of integrating Islamic values into their political aspirations. This was evident in their advocacy for the teaching of Arabic, the language of the Quran, alongside French in schools, and their respect for Islamic holidays, rituals, and values. They even supported the Ottomans (as fellow Muslims) in their war against the Italians (Bouhouche, 1997: 205). These actions garnered admiration both internally and externally, though they failed to gain full support from the broader Algerian populace. Many Algerians did not believe in the idea of integration with the French, particularly since it involved conscription into the French army, which they viewed as an attempt to harness Islam to serve Christianity. To them, their struggle was a jihad against Christian domination, and the capitalist colonial policies of discrimination only fueled their resentment. They did not see these policies as mere violations of their rights but as

foreign practices imposed upon them, practices that would only be lifted when the occupation was removed from their land and system.

This dual sense of identity—rooted in both religion and land—was essential to their resistance, as highlighted by historian Paul Gavril, who observed that "France was fighting in Algeria a nation motivated by religion and patriotism" (Saadallah, 1992: 519). In this context, religion was seen as the foundation of national identity, making liberalism an idea ahead of its time in occupied Algeria, despite being embraced by figures like Prince Khalid. Prince Khalid, a descendant of the religious leadership of Emir Abdelkader, was significantly influenced by the intellectual movements of the Alawite order and the Egyptian reformer Mohamed Abduh, as well as his scientific and military training at the prestigious Saint-Cyr Military College (Gomorrah, 2002: 164). These influences drove him to align with the integrationist and reformist movements of the Algerian youth.

Prince Khalid demanded political reforms in Algeria and, as a media figure, was able to promote his reformist ideas and political demands. However, his efforts were met with hostility from France, which saw his calls for reform as a direct incitement for the Algerian population to revolt against the European settlers in Algeria (Bouhouche, 1997: 207). This reaction from the colonial authorities was an indication of their deep suspicion and resistance to any movement that challenged their control, no matter its size or influence.

Despite the elite's efforts, the movement led by Prince Khalid and the Algerian youth did not resonate fully with the broader Algerian population. Their liberal aspirations, centered on concepts of sovereignty and national identity, were ahead of their time in the context of colonial Algeria. Yet, this movement laid the intellectual groundwork for modern political thought, introducing ideas that would later shape the concept of the modern state. These ideas, born out of liberalism and reformist thought, provided the intellectual pillars necessary for Algeria's eventual struggle for independence.

2.2. Socialist Ideology

The restrictive policies imposed by French colonialism on Algerians led to the acquisition of agricultural lands, forests, pastures, fields, endowments, and personal real estate. These resources were heavily taxed, creating a social structure governed by the *Code de l'Indigénat* and civil police forces established by the French administration after the fall of the Second Empire.

Algerians faced an inevitable fate with the rise of a colonial production system that transformed the rural population into a small group of major feudalists. Meanwhile, the urban population became wage laborers in the factories and workshops of the old capitalists. With few options, many Algerians complied in order to survive poverty and displacement. These conditions forced migration towards coastal areas, where Algerian cities became "vital links for economic movement, serving as stations for major agricultural markets" (Stora, 2004: 95). These cities became hubs for intellectual exchange and contact with new ideas, while others sought opportunities by migrating outside Algeria, particularly to the Near East and Europe, especially France.

Since these new conditions were imposed on the Algerians, not of their own making or choosing, they resisted them both secretly and openly, at home and abroad. Their rebellion was part of the very dynamic of the new conditions that France had created. Algerians were even recruited into the French ranks during the fight against Germany. These circumstances reshaped the social fabric, destroying the basic structures of Algerian society. At the same time, they created an educated elite, which began to analyze the contradictions and injustices within society. This elite reignited the rebellion, struggling against capitalist imperialism.

For the Algerians, this revolutionary movement was more than just a resistance effort. It signified an emerging political consciousness that fueled national fervor. They expressed this by aligning with trade union ideas that defended the middle class. This movement also re-examined concepts of sovereignty and state-building, leading to the adoption of socialist ideals that resonated with the national elite in Algeria. Many of its leaders, including Masali al-Hajj and Hajj Ali Abd al-Qadir, joined central organizations like the French Socialist Party, as well as the *Étoile Nord-Africaine* (Star of North Africa). These affiliations had profound intellectual and ideological effects on the revolutionary movement and the nature of political power after Algeria's independence.

The *Communist Manifesto* sparked strong reactions against colonial and exploitative regimes, as well as the liberal notion of political power. Revolutionary movements, including those in Algeria, rejected the concept of power as merely a tool for monopolizing the will of the people and widening the divide between owners of production and politically oppressed workers. The Manifesto called for the workers of the world to unite as a revolutionary force against capitalist exploitation. The *Étoile Nord-*

Africaine was part of this intellectual current after its founding in 1926 as a revolutionary national organization in the diaspora (France), closely linked to its leader, Masali al-Hajj.

This organization could not escape the ideological pressures of the *Communist Manifesto*, as it addressed the exploitation faced by Algerian workers both in the diaspora and within Algeria. The *Étoile Nord-Africaine* sought to transform the wage earner into an owner and advocated for a national struggle for Algerian sovereignty. This objective led to its eventual separation from the French Communist Party, which sought to maintain communist control over Algerians rather than support their independent efforts. Masali al-Hajj emphasized this, saying, "The Algerians want independence in their homeland, not communist tutelage... We have left the communism of death and adhered to patriotism, which is the symbol of life" (Ageron, 1982: 352).

Thus, the *Étoile Nord-Africaine* was not just an institutional organization with a fixed intellectual path. It was a movement born out of the colonial occupation's harsh realities and ideological struggles, contributing to the development of a political culture that left a lasting impact on Algerian memory.

The North African Star Movement, as a political party, marked the beginning of a transformation. This movement planted the seeds for a new vision of governance, grounded in political economy mechanisms, particularly a socialist orientation. National leaders were set to replace religious leaders, and populist movements would take over from sectarian groups. In this new order, religion would play a national role, preserving Algerian identity and its social structure. This was the core political demand of the struggle movement. The legitimacy of the nation became a key principle, prioritizing unity among the movement's ranks, overcoming political and ideological differences, and condemning the oppression faced by the Algerian people and their political parties. Despite their various demands for independence and integration, all these groups contributed to shaping the mechanisms that would transform the concept of political struggle in Algeria.

This transformation was deeply influenced by intellectual debates at both global and local levels. The national elite began to distinguish itself from the traditional elite, leading the struggle by embracing change and the material and political developments of the time. This elite promoted socialist, communist, and liberal capitalist ideologies, all of which viewed governance from a materialist perspective. Liberalism, in particular, championed the right of individuals to participate in society, under the banner of democracy and freedoms, expressed through elections, parliaments, and other such mechanisms. The leaders of the national movement sought to incorporate these ideas into the broader framework of social necessity and the fight for independence. Figures such as Ben Jaloul, founder of the *Federation of Algerian Muslim Electors (FEMA)*, and Farhat Abbas, founder of the *Algerian Democratic Union (UDMA)*, utilized these ideas in their calls for the unification of Algeria with a French boycott.

These political parties, despite excluding a direct demand for independence, emphasized parliamentary representation and equality between Algerians and French settlers by calling for the repeal of the *Andjana* law. They represented a transitional political movement that laid the groundwork for militant thought. They began adopting modern political terms, such as "parliament," "democracy," "popular representation," and "elections," which were unfamiliar to Arab-Islamic culture. These terms portrayed Muslims not only as citizens but also as individuals with an awareness of their role within a legal system, as outlined by social contract theories. However, these changes created divergent reactions, with significant implications for the struggle movement and the fate of the national cause.

This divergence was primarily ideological, with the movement split between two camps: those demanding integration and those advocating for independence. The independence camp sought to restore Algerian sovereignty over political and economic institutions and to free society from the French administration's control. On the other hand, the integrationists pursued the recognition of political rights without racial, ethnic, or religious discrimination between Algerians and European settlers. They aimed for Algerian integration into a modern state system, where power is based on a set of duties and the relationship between individuals and the state is governed by laws, regardless of who holds power. This reformist ideology introduced new national ideas that clashed with traditional customs, the foundation of Algerian society.

The integrationists, led by figures like Farhat Abbas, aimed to blend Arab-Islamic identity with liberal reformist ideals. They sought to create an Algerian political model grounded in Enlightenment thought, using modern political vocabulary to express national sovereignty. However, despite their efforts to preserve Islamic identity, their approach failed to resonate widely. This failure was due to the nature of the conflict, which was fundamentally about the fate of a nation seeking to reclaim its historical and cultural identity. The situation required a revolutionary approach, not just integration, as the socialist vision gained traction by aligning with popular sentiment and the daily struggles of the people

under colonial rule. The French occupation rejected even the integrationist project and reneged on its reform promises, such as the *Bloom-Violet* project, which excluded Algerians from meaningful political participation.

This rejection made the liberal camp realize the deep-rooted sensitivity of the Algerian people towards integrationist thought for several reasons:

a) Liberalism was closely tied to global imperialism and, specifically, to the French occupation. The French military and economic oppression contradicted the very modernity that liberal thought claimed to bring. The concepts of government and state-building, as envisioned by the liberals, were alien and contradictory to the socio-cultural identity of the Algerian people. The French administration's racism placed the Algerians outside the legal framework of liberalism, a fact that no amount of concessions could disguise in its dealings with the Algerian political elite.

b) The social life of the Algerian people is deeply rooted in a set of rules, many of which are formulated through religious rulings. These rules foster a perception that equating themselves with the French amounts to ideological betrayal, a denial of their history, and a renunciation of their cultural and religious identity. As a result, the Algerian people's natural resistance to the integration project was strong, as they saw the demand for equality within the French system as incompatible with their aspirations for independence.

This realization led Farhat Abbas to eventually abandon the integration project. He declared, "the liberation of the civil man will be the task of the civil society itself, and in order to achieve this, the masses must be mobilized, so our duty is represented in the slogan of the people for the sake of the people" (Amoura, 2002: 176). Abbas had initially hoped that Algeria could adopt French democracy while preserving its customs, traditions, and language, but this vision became more aligned with the independent orientation. The people responded to this shift, and many of the political elites joined the cause, aligning themselves with the struggle on behalf of the Algerian People's Party (PPA), which represented various social groups. This party was founded by Messali Hadj as a continuation of the *North African Star*, which had been dissolved by the Popular Front government on January 26, 1937 (Amoura, 2002: 180).

Despite the alignment of the political elites with the popular movement, ideological differences persisted among them. Some were oriented towards socialism, while others leaned towards liberalism. Nevertheless, the power of the people became the critical factor in establishing political leadership and conferring legitimacy. This time, legitimacy was derived not from lineage or tribal connections but from the heroism of national struggles. Islam, as previously mentioned, remained a crucial factor in this patriotism. It carried values that resonated with both Arab and Islamic nationalism, uniting the Algerian people around a shared identity that transcended political ideologies.

3.1 Reformist Trend

The period following Algeria's association with France from 1930 onwards represents a significant phase in the maturation of Western modernity concepts and the revolutionary movements that sought to overthrow traditional perceptions, which were often condemned by the reformist groups of the time. Within this environment, the Islamic religion could not escape the pressures of these revolutionary movements. From the perspective of liberal thought, Islam, like other traditional institutions, was seen as an obstacle to progress. It stood in direct opposition to European cultural expansion and played a key role in preserving conservative values, especially in the occupied Islamic lands.

Although Algerians resisted French occupation in the name of their Islamic identity, this resistance did not exempt them from being influenced by the modern intellectual movements that spread across various political and ideological spectrums at the time. Nor did it shield them from the social complicity and submission to the inevitability of historical change, which they had to respond to according to the circumstances imposed upon them. This complex reality shaped both the popular and elite attitudes towards religion and ideology.

A. Social and Religious Dynamics under Colonial Rule

The changes Algeria underwent during French occupation were not part of a deliberate social reform project aimed at improving society. Rather, they were driven by a political agenda that employed violence and oppression to subjugate the Algerian people, marginalizing them and forcing them into a state of backwardness. This was reinforced by colonial strategies that dismantled traditional societal structures, leading many to seek refuge in religious myths and superstitions. These beliefs played a

particularly strong role in rural and Bedouin areas, where the populace turned to saints and religious figures as protectors in a reality characterized by ignorance and heresy.

This dynamic was not merely a reflection of an ideological stance but a response to a lived reality. Algerians were trapped in a society devastated by wars of resistance, plagued by infectious diseases, burdened by heavy taxes, and whose basic tribal structures were destroyed. Many were displaced, and the elites who once led the nation found themselves in political disarray, with some serving as mere intermediaries for the colonial administration under laws such as the *Andijana* law. As Djeghloul (1988: 4) observes, this society was "a society whose elites clashed with political failure, and some of them turned into just a mediator for the colonial occupation state."

One of the significant consequences of this colonial domination was the erosion of Islamic values. Deprived of its traditional leadership and jurisprudence, the Algerian people turned to myths and superstitions to fill the spiritual and intellectual vacuum left by the decline of the Islamic *Imamate* and *Caliphate*, which had been extinguished by the end of the Ottoman era and further obliterated by French colonialism. The colonial authorities targeted the core of Islamic education, dismantling its traditional systems and replacing them with new educational structures that promoted secularism (*laïcité*) and compulsory education as weapons against the Arabic language and Islam.

The French colonial government's education policies were cemented by laws such as the 1883 law, which imposed new teaching principles that marginalized Islamic education. As Djeghloul (1988: 6) explains, these principles were "based on *laïcité* and compulsory education, to be a weapon against the Arabic language and Islam." This approach was further reinforced by the 1892 law, which restricted Quranic schools (known as *kuttabs*) from teaching during school hours and limited Arabic language instruction to only two hours per week. These efforts were part of a broader attempt by the French to dismantle the religious and cultural fabric of Algerian society, deepening the social and political alienation felt by many Algerians.

Through these oppressive measures, the French sought to undermine the religious and cultural identity of the Algerian people, pushing them toward assimilation into French culture while attempting to erase their Islamic heritage. However, this imposition also fueled the rise of a reformist movement that sought to revive Islamic values and resist colonial domination, laying the groundwork for future nationalist and revolutionary movements.

B. The Impact of French Political Strategy and the Formation of the Algerian Elite

The political strategy adopted by the French administration in Algeria, alongside the construction of a colonial settlement state, played a significant role in the emergence of a new class of elites. Some members of the traditional leadership, marginalized for a long time, gained access to French schools and Arab and foreign institutes outside Algeria. This educational exposure allowed them to absorb modern developments, both domestically and internationally. They were key figures in transforming Algeria's modern history into a political narrative, one that reframed cultural convictions through a realistic understanding of political and social challenges.

These elites, whom Djeghloul (1988: 5) calls "new men," emerged from a distinct form of equality and were instrumental in reconstructing the social structure under the influence of a violent and authoritarian modernity. This transformation was dictated by the political and intellectual movements of the time, which included diverse socio-political and religious trends. These elites began to question the cultural references of Algerians and pondered the way out of colonial occupation. The rise of intellectual media—facilitated by the advent of writing, printing, and publishing—allowed them to spread their ideas, promote the national struggle, and articulate their political and ideological positions. Each faction sought to gain popular legitimacy, not necessarily through well-developed political programs, but through the mobilization of demands that rejected the occupation and expressed the conflicting intellectual currents within the national movement.

C. Islam and the Reformist Movement

Islam played a central role in the ideological and political struggles of the period. Although the concept of reform did not seek to ideologize religion, it was clear that Islam—an enduring aspect of Algerian identity—became a rallying point for resistance against the French administration. Leaders of the national movement employed Islam in their political competition, attempting to win over the popular base, which was deeply rooted in religious institutions such as *zawiyas* (religious lodges) and *turūq* (Sufi brotherhoods) that retained their authority in both rural and urban areas. These religious institutions served as a focal point of resistance to colonial policies of exclusion and marginalization.

Colonial authorities attempted to undermine the influence of these religious centers by curtailing their activities and promoting policies of secularism, which led to a decline in religious thinking and jurisprudential development. Faced with these challenges, political elites, representing various ideological orientations, sought to maintain the separation of religion from politics, urging France not to interfere with Islamic values. The Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars, led by Abdul Hamid Ibn Badis, played a pivotal role in the Islamic awakening and the broader Arab liberation movements of the time. The association sought to revive Islamic understanding and correct religious misconceptions, fighting against the superstitions and heresies that had infiltrated the faith, particularly through Sufi practices prevalent in the Islamic Maghreb.

Ibn Badis, a fierce critic of Sufism, saw it as a source of religious innovation and doctrinal misguidance. He lamented that the younger generation had become detached from productive jurisprudence due to the colonial repression of Islamic institutions. The French administration's policies, aimed at weakening the influence of religious resistance and jihad, had forced many religious leaders to retreat into mysticism and detachment from worldly affairs. The colonial authorities turned many religious lodges into sanctuaries for superstitions and places of escape for Algerians disillusioned with their tragic reality under occupation.

D. The Muslim Scholars' Rationalization of Islamic Concepts

In response to these developments, the Algerian Association of Muslim Scholars, led by Ibn Badis, sought to rationalize Islamic concepts and correct the damage inflicted by colonial policies. The association's mission was to reform Islamic thought, fight against the secularization efforts of the French administration, and restore the prominence of Islamic institutions. This effort was part of a broader movement to resist the cultural and religious erosion brought about by colonialism. Despite the obstacles posed by the French occupation, the association's efforts contributed significantly to preserving the Islamic identity of Algeria and laying the groundwork for future nationalist movements that would eventually lead to independence.

The political strategy of the French in Algeria, while aimed at consolidating their control over the colony, inadvertently led to the rise of a new intellectual elite and a reformist movement centered around Islamic values. This movement, led by scholars and religious leaders like Ibn Badis, played a critical role in shaping Algeria's national identity and resisting colonial domination. Through their efforts to rationalize and revive Islamic thought, these reformists were able to mobilize the population and contribute to the broader struggle for independence.

France's colonial strategy aimed to hybridize the Algerian identity, both culturally and politically, through a complex manipulation of religion. On the one hand, the French colonial authorities sought to banish religion from the public sphere, yet paradoxically used it to exert control over the population. This tension contributed to the unique character of religious reform in Algeria, which intertwined deeply with political concerns. The reform movement, inspired by figures such as Sheikh Mohamed Abdou, emphasized the liberation of minds, purification of doctrine, and the eradication of ignorance as prerequisites for individual and national decolonization. Sheikh Bashir Al-Ibrahimi, a prominent leader of the Association of Muslim Scholars, highlighted this connection, asserting that "the Association of Scholars liberated minds, refined ideas, and awakened feelings," with the natural outcome being the liberation of the soul (Al-Ibrahimi, 1994: 170).

E. Religious Reform as Resistance to Cultural Invasion

Religious reform in Algeria was not merely a matter of faith but a form of resistance against the cultural invasion brought by colonialism. The reform movement in Algeria was part of a larger Islamic renewal, heavily influenced by the intellectual and militant currents from the Arab East, although these movements entered Algeria later. Despite this delay, their impact on the reform project and militant thought in Algeria was profound. Muslim scholars and intellectual elites responded to the French occupation with a dual approach: neutral resistance on one hand, and the rational employment of Islamic principles on the other, mobilizing religious values to strengthen their resistance efforts. By the 1930s, this approach became more pronounced, as religious reformers faced several key transformations that shaped the movement:

- 1. Dismantling of Traditional Land Ownership Systems:** The colonial authorities dismantled Algeria's traditional throne ownership system, a method of collective production that ensured political unity. The seizure and redistribution of land by the French administration destroyed a vital economic and cultural resource. This land, once governed by Sharia law and religious customs that established social relations between landowners and farmers, was replaced by secular institutions

imposed by the French. The transformation of land ownership altered the fabric of Algerian society, weakening its cohesion and displacing religious norms.

2. **Cultural and Intellectual Siege:** The French occupation imposed severe restrictions on the Algerian people, limiting their movement and imposing a state of insecurity that stifled intellectual growth, particularly in religious and linguistic matters. This environment allowed heresies and superstitions to thrive, filling the vacuum left by the decline of traditional religious learning. Despite these challenges, institutions such as *zawiyas* and *turūq* (Sufi brotherhoods) continued to exist, preserving some form of religious continuity, albeit in a weakened state.

3. **Fragmentation of the Arab-Islamic World:** By the early 20th century, European colonial powers had taken control of much of the Arab world, leading to the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the separation of Islamic nations. This fragmentation created a cultural rift among Arab and Islamic groups, weakening their ability to collectively resist European aggression. The decline of the caliphate, which symbolized political sovereignty with religious legitimacy, further complicated efforts to restore Islamic unity. This fragmentation was accompanied by the introduction of secular, Western concepts into Arab-Islamic societies, particularly in urban centers, where institutions with utilitarian and Enlightenment purposes were established under the pretext of modernizing the region.

The Emergence of Regenerative Thought

Amid these cultural and political shifts, Algerian intellectuals found themselves navigating between two dominant ideological currents: liberal Enlightenment thought, which embraced Western modernity and political liberalism, and conservative thought, which rejected these ideas in favor of maintaining Islamic traditions. The tension between these two perspectives created space for a regenerative reformist current to emerge. This movement, defending the Islamic community, sought to correct misconceptions, eliminate religious negativity, and rationalize Islamic law. These reformers positioned themselves against Western-inspired Enlightenment rationalization, which had infiltrated Islamic countries, including Algeria.

Religious and social reform became integral to the national political struggle, as the reformers recognized that decolonization was not only a political project but also a cultural and intellectual one. They believed that by renewing Islamic thought and rationalizing Sharia, they could counter the negative effects of Western colonial influence while preserving the essence of Algerian identity. This synthesis of religion and politics laid the groundwork for the national liberation movement, as religious reformers helped cultivate a sense of cultural pride and intellectual resistance, ultimately contributing to Algeria's struggle for independence.

France's efforts to hybridize the Algerian personality through the manipulation of religion and culture sparked a powerful reform movement that combined religious revival with political resistance. The struggle for cultural and political sovereignty in Algeria was deeply intertwined with the efforts of Muslim scholars and reformers to restore religious legitimacy and combat the colonial intrusion of Western values. This reformist current played a crucial role in shaping Algeria's intellectual and political trajectory, as it sought to reclaim the nation's Islamic identity while navigating the complexities of modernity and colonialism.

In the early 20th century, reformist thought in Algeria, particularly among the conservative religious bloc, began to emerge as a response to the cultural and political challenges brought about by French colonialism. Influential clerics, such as Sheikh al-Mawlid ibn al-Mawhib, played a pivotal role in this movement. Ibn al-Mawhib, a prominent religious authority and the Mufti of Constantine, was deeply influenced by the progressive ideas of reformist scholars like Sheikh Muhammad 'Abdo and Rashid Rida. He recognized that Algeria's decline, driven by ignorance and backwardness, could only be remedied through mental enlightenment and engagement with modern sciences, alongside a deeper understanding of Islam.

However, Ibn al-Mawhib's reformist vision was shaped by a cautious and pragmatic approach. He believed that reform should occur within the framework of the French colonial presence and advocated for Algeria's integration into the French state, with a focus on achieving equality between Algerians and French settlers. His call for progressive education in both Arabic and French aimed to uplift Algerians through knowledge and tolerance, while retaining a connection to their Islamic heritage. However, this approach posed a dilemma: while Ibn al-Mawhib sought to preserve Islam as a moral and spiritual foundation, his proposal for reform within the colonial system failed to resonate with many Algerians who longed for national independence.

His advocacy for integration, coupled with demands for equality, was met with resistance from both the colonial administration and the broader Algerian public. The French authorities had no interest in granting equality to Algerians, as doing so would threaten their control over the territory and open the door to political participation by the colonized population. Furthermore, many Algerians rejected the notion of integration into a colonial system that had marginalized and oppressed them for decades.

The limitations of conservative reformist thought became evident as the national struggle for independence gained momentum. While Ibn al-Mawhib emphasized the need for Algerians to reconnect with the true teachings of Islam, his vision did not align with the revolutionary aspirations of the broader nationalist movement. Reformist leaders like Sheikh Abdul Hamid bin Badis, associated with the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars, advocated for a more radical departure from colonialism. They sought to resist French integration policies and preserve Algeria's national identity, emphasizing the need for an "Islam of thought and consideration" that would inspire social and political renewal.

This reformist Islamic claim, which promoted rationalizing religious practices and re-employing the provisions of Sharia, aimed to awaken society and build a militant national consciousness. By rejecting the passive, traditional Islam that had prevailed under colonial rule, reformers sought to empower Algerians to resist French cultural and political domination. They also worked to counter the colonial administration's use of religious figures to coerce Algerians into supporting France's war efforts, particularly during World War I, and opposed the policies of naturalization advocated by some political elites.

In summary, the conservative reformist movement in Algeria, led by figures like Ibn al-Mawhib, was a complex blend of religious renewal and pragmatic accommodation within the colonial framework. However, it ultimately failed to galvanize the broader population, as its call for reform within the confines of French rule was at odds with the growing demand for full national independence and the preservation of Algeria's Islamic and cultural identity.

The neutral position of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars on political engagement, focusing instead on religious reform and education, reveals a distinctive approach to the national struggle in Algeria. The association, established as an educational organization with defined goals, deliberately avoided deep involvement in political issues. This choice created a vacuum in the national discourse, which was filled by various intellectual and militant debates. These discussions gained momentum in the context of rapid economic transformations and colonial investments that reshaped Algerian society. As a result, the social role of religion in Algeria was redefined through two main proposals, both of which sought reform but approached it differently:

1. The Secular Proposal:

This view was supported by the Algerian elite, who advocated for the separation of religion from political and civil matters. According to this proposal, human society is capable of achieving discipline, progress, and freedom without religious oversight. Religion, in this perspective, should be a personal choice and should not dictate political or civil legislation. This secular-liberal view of religion, as articulated by thinkers like Benjamin Constant, maintains that freedom is a fundamental right, and any authority that restricts these freedoms is illegitimate. Algerian secularists believed that the Islamic religion should remain a private matter, and that religion should not be used as a standard in governance. They argued that Algerian nationalism should not be framed exclusively in religious terms but rather be aligned with liberal values of individual freedom and national progress. However, they recognized that religion remained a significant part of the nation's cultural identity and legitimacy in its struggle for independence.

2. The Reformist Proposal:

In contrast to the secular approach, the reformist view sought to preserve the foundational role of Islam in Algerian society. Reformists aimed to rationalize Islamic law (Sharia) and protect it from theological misinterpretations, particularly those associated with extreme forms of Sufism. They viewed Islam as an essential pillar of Algerian culture, customs, ethics, and legislation. Reformists advocated for a revival of Islam that would allow it to serve as a dynamic and regenerative force in the face of colonial occupation. They opposed the secularist integrationists who, influenced by French liberal values, denied the existence of an Algerian nation and argued for full integration into the French state. The reformists, as represented by *Al-Shihab* newspaper, rejected this notion, viewing it as a betrayal of the values of Algerian nationalism rooted in Islam.

One of the key moments in this intellectual debate occurred when some Algerian deputies, under the influence of French culture, claimed that there was no Algerian nationalism to speak of. They argued that Algeria's future was intertwined with France, and therefore, full integration with the French nation

was the only logical path forward. This was seen by the religious reformist thought as a betrayal of the values of the Algerian nation, which are derived from Islam. It was regarded as a form of "political mysticism," akin to the saying: "I searched for you, O France, only to find myself— I am France," mirroring the words of the mystic who says: "I searched for you, O God, only to find myself— I am God"

It was a clear response, as expressed by *Al-Shihab* magazine, to all those who needed to hear it, aiming to strip these liberal and secular representatives (the deputies) of their legitimacy in representing the Algerian nation, which "exists in the annals of history and in the present reality, possessing its religious and linguistic unity."

With the interface between the two proposals, new forms of national struggle emerged in Algeria, characterized by a moderate reformist approach. The elite of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars played a key role in reorganizing the resistance under the banner of religion, deliberately distancing themselves from political conflicts (whether French political or Islamic religious). This is evident in their reformist demands, which, while rooted in religious principles, also had political objectives. Their efforts aimed to unite the Algerian people under the banner of Arabism and Islam, educating the youth about the distinct Algerian identity and preparing them for future struggles. The direction of Algeria's future, shaped by the revolution of November 1954, became a historical reference for the political, economic, and social transformations that followed. These changes, linked to the national struggle, required mobilizing all ethno-cultural elements, such as religion, identity, and language, elevating them to a sacred status, which in turn legitimized the resistance in its various revolutionary forms.

2. The Revolutionary Trend in Building Militant Thought

Revolutionary thought in Algeria did not emerge in November 1954. Instead, rebellion—the essence of the revolution—has always been a means for Algerians to reclaim their social identity. This struggle manifested through various uprisings against the French presence, perceived as a threat to the social fabric. The response to colonial rule was characterized by acts of rebellion and defiance against the oppressive policies imposed by the colonial government. These actions represented a rejection of colonialism, reflecting the ideological rifts within the Algerian national movement. This movement was shaped by the ongoing conflict within Algerian society and influenced by global events such as the First and Second World Wars, along with the values that arose during the Cold War between the Eastern and Western powers. These factors significantly affected the development of militant thought in Algeria, as well as the dynamics between the French government and Algerians (the elite).

The Cold War shifted the competition for power toward economic dimensions, altering the legitimacy of the national political struggle. Consequently, the revolution became a central concept and a mechanism for achieving national interests, opposing the colonial powers driven by imperial expansionism—defined as exercising control beyond national borders. This ongoing conflict produced symbols and principles that contradicted one another between the two dominant ideologies: communism and capitalism. These ideologies had a profound impact on the construction of militant thought and revolutionary action in Algeria as a French colony.

a) In response to the communist trend, the French argued that "the revolution in Algeria is the creation of the rules of the communist theory, which is based on employing the existing ethnic, social, and ideological opposition and exploiting it to resist the existing regime in the style of terrorism and propaganda" (Pervillé, 1985). According to this perspective, the call for freedom and the liberation of Algeria was seen as a fabrication of international communism, and the Algerian national movement was purportedly a product of the French Communist Party. This narrative began with the establishment of the North African Star as the first organization and subsequently evolved into the Algerian People's Party, which founded the Movement for the Victory of Democratic Freedoms, leading to the emergence of the Algerian National Movement (MNA) and the National Liberation Front (FLN). Thus, the French thesis attributed revolutionary action to a communist framework, disregarding the liberal demands articulated by the intellectual elite since 1919 through the Algerian youth movement and the Prince Khalid movement advocating for autonomy. These groups were not aligned with communist ideology but instead supported integrationist liberalism, maintaining loyalty among citizens.

b) Under the pressures of economic and social forces from both the East and the West, revolutionary ideology emerged in Algeria as part of the struggle for legitimacy. This involved balancing social and political modernization with the desire for freedom, as articulated in the manifesto, alongside cultural and religious reform led by the Association of Muslim Scholars. Radical perspectives, as represented by the People's Party and its political offshoots like the Movement for the Triumph of

Democratic Freedoms, the National Movement, and the National Liberation Front, revealed fundamental differences within the revolutionary ranks. These divisions highlighted the conflict between centralists and supporters of the People's Party, as well as between radicals and liberals. This complexity contributed to the character of the struggle, which Muhammad Harbi described as "La lutte des clans." In this context, popular framing based on ideological beliefs was often absent, resulting in a shift toward personal convictions.

The revolution became a military, social, and political necessity, marking a pivotal moment for testing the values of struggle. This development was largely influenced by the reaction of the Algerian people, whose cultural values served as the primary reference for any political legitimacy. The pioneers of the revolutionary movement, particularly the popular factions, recognized this and re-emphasized these cultural values to build their capacities for leadership. They sought to guide a population suffering from economic and social oppression. Notably, Masali al-Hajj transformed these cultural values into a revolutionary vision that opposed French rule. This vision prioritized confirming the identity of the Algerian people by "seeking a revolutionary national government, an army, and restoring Arabic as an official language" (Harbi, 1980: 16).

The emergence of populism, encompassing cultural, religious, and ethnic dimensions, redefined the concept of national struggle in the Algerian revolution. This shift was rooted in the beliefs of the followers of Masali al-Hajj, who considered any political program or direct intervention essential for solving the national issue. They understood that neglecting public awareness and unity could lead to reckless actions. As social and political behaviors became contingent upon "revolutionary awareness," the resistance for independence embraced notions of sacredness and sacrifice (Harbi, 1999: 52). This ideology arose under the pressures of class relations shaped by the capitalist colonial mode of production, which undermined the traditional agricultural economy. As a result, many Algerians found themselves transformed into a working class of impoverished peasants and laborers.

The political discourse during this period highlighted the divide between the rich and the poor, influenced by external factors. It drew its foundations from the deep roots of Arab nationalism, particularly its spiritual dimensions. This was evident through the affirmation of Algerian values and national commitment, as well as the strengthening of popular patriotism. The revolutionaries emphasized the creativity and moral superiority of the uneducated. This populism forged a bond between the Movement for the Victory of Democratic Freedoms and the People's Party. The movement became embedded in the ideological fabric of society, and resistance emerged as a necessity, embracing revolutionary violence as a means of expression. This was a continuation of previous popular resistance, or jihad, led by populist leaders. Such a shift became a crucial variable for measuring the legitimacy of the national political struggle concerning sovereignty and independence in Algeria.

The features of this struggle began to emerge amid the crisis within the Algerian People's Party and the movements advocating for the victory of freedoms. This crisis highlighted the division among leaders, separating them into factions of voters and centralists. These leaders were committed to political legitimacy, a concept that held little meaning during French occupation. This turmoil led to a shaky perception of the party among middle-class social and cultural activists. The leftist members of the split movement began questioning Algeria's Arab identity and Islamic heritage. In response, these leftists, as members of the French Federal Committee, voted overwhelmingly—28 out of 32—to employ force against the Central Committee to reject this notion (Harbi, 1980: 65).

Because these principles form the foundation of Algerian mass populism, the leftists struggled to revitalize populism and secure political legitimacy. This situation prompted the party's youth, mobilized through its newspapers and organizations, to establish a clandestine revolutionary wing. The French authorities discovered this wing in 1950, but it was later reorganized under the name of the Revolutionary Front for Unity and Action. This newly formed group ultimately facilitated the November 1954 revolution, which redefined Algerian national thought and established new values and standards to clarify the concept of national and political struggle.

4. Conclusion

The construction of militant thought in Algeria assumed ideological dimensions that reflected a continuous narrative of the national movement during the French occupation. This struggle unfolded on two fronts: one internal, marked by tensions within the National Party and among various national factions, and another external, directed against the colonizer. The nature of this conflict hinged on how concepts derived from Western experiences, as well as geopolitical and economic transformations, influenced the organizations of the Algerian national movement. These transformations were

exacerbated by the presence of French elements in Algeria, particularly concerning public order and the principle of settlement.

This ideological struggle manifested as a response from the national movement's leaders, establishing a reaction against the French administration. At that time, integrationist trends clashed with independence movements, leading to distinct ideological options that defined the national struggle:

1. **Reformist Trend:** This religious intellectual model was characterized by two main aspects. The first was the influence of Sufism and traditional Islamic practices, which collided with early resistance efforts, such as those led by Prince Abdul Qadir. This aspect focused on solidifying spiritual values and the ascetic methods tied to national identity. The second aspect was represented by the reformist thought of the Muslim Scholars Association, which promoted a renaissance discourse for the entire Islamic nation, rooted in a shared language and history. However, the reformist trend faced limitations due to the adverse conditions imposed by the French colonizers, who systematically marginalized Algerians socially and economically. Consequently, this Islamic orientation adopted a pacifist approach, advocating for a separation of religion from politics to protect Islamic doctrine from cultural and social exclusion.

2. **Socialist Trend:** This trend significantly influenced the militant thought of the revolutionary elite, linking their activities to Western socialist revolutionary ideas, particularly scientific socialism. These ideas emphasized anti-colonialism, class disparities, and justice. The resonance of these concepts among oppressed peoples, including Algerians under colonial rule, prompted educated elites to adopt them as a revolutionary and developmental framework following national independence. The conviction emerged that socialist principles could address the aspirations of the Algerian people and their national movement against French colonialism, perceived as an imperialist force exerting economic pressure on vulnerable populations. This was echoed in the words of Mujahid Arab Martyr Ibn Mahidi, who articulated that the objective of the Algerians taking up arms was to expel the imperialist occupier, establish a social democratic republic, and construct a socialist system. The revolutionary elite and the Algerian Communist Party coalesced around these socialist principles, rejecting ideologies that deviated from the cultural specifics of Algerian identity, particularly regarding religious beliefs and Islam as a progressive reference.

3. **Liberal Trend:** This strand of militant thought in Algeria drew on Enlightenment principles, advocating for secularization and the liberation of production from totalitarian controls and religious moral constraints. However, because it espoused a bourgeois capitalist ideology, it struggled to find a place within the national revolutionary struggle. Despite this, there were individuals sympathetic to liberal ideas, promoting innovative ideologies aimed at fostering democracy, which allowed them to navigate the political landscape amid the tensions between socialist and reformist doctrines.

The ideological contestation reflected in both the socialist and liberal trends significantly shaped the national movement's thought and its militant elements, who spoke on behalf of Algerian sovereignty. These figures transformed into revolutionary symbols and established criteria for legitimizing the national struggle against colonialism. Ultimately, this ideological and intellectual process responded to a legitimate demand: the urgent necessity to liberate Algeria from French colonial rule and redefine sovereignty through the lens of freedom.

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