
*To be Religious and to be Political in Colonial Algeria:
The Ulama and the Nationalists, Two Approaches*

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Introduction and Main Questions

In the Algerian nationalist movement, Islam was often considered to be the core of national identity.¹ Islam as a cultural identity was important not only in the Islamic reform movement of the *Ulama* (Islamic scholars), but also in nationalist political parties.² However, while radical nationalists considered their political struggle against colonialism to be compatible with their religious consciousness, the Ulama rejected politics and were ostensibly non-political.

The Association of Algerian Ulama was founded in 1931 as an association of Islamic intellectuals. This association always claimed that it was

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1. Ricardo René Laremont, *Islam and the Politics of Resistance in Algeria 1783–1992* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2000), 222.
 2. I mean by cultural identity a cultural element of the individual or community which causes a feeling of collectivity. This feeling might develop a political nationalist movement when economical/political/social conditions are favorable. Transformation of traditional societies in the modern period and the emergence of new cultural identities as the basis of nationalism were argued by Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and other sociologists. In particular see Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983). While Gellner treated Islam as a religion of exception because it cannot be compatible with secularism, which is, according to him, the precondition of modern nationalism, other authors claim that Islam just as other religions and traditions can be center of national identity in any nation-state, not always as a institutionalized judicial system but as a cultural identity (memories, symbols, myths, values and traditions as sources of national identity). See Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

dealing only with religious affairs, and that it never intervenes in political matters. Their main activity was the promotion of religious education, and the spreading of Islamic “reformist” ideas in society.³ In addition, the third article of their constitution forbids the Association to be involved in any political affairs.⁴

However, in spite of this reservation regarding political matters, on several occasions the Association of Ulama played a guiding role in the formation of national fronts among different nationalist groups. For example, the first political congress of Muslims of 1936 was proposed initially by Ibn Badis, president of the Association of Ulama.⁵ In 1944 the Ulama participated in a united front called “The Friends of the Manifesto and of Liberty” (*Les Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté*).⁶ In 1951 they organized a similar alliance between themselves and other political parties, called “The Algerian Front for Defense and Respect of Liberties” (*Le Front algérien pour la Défense et le Respect des Libertés*, FDRL).⁷

The Ulama’s discourse seems contradictory. *Why did the Ulama refuse to be seen as political, while being effectively involved in political activities?* This is the main question of this study. Some historians say the Ulama avoided being called a “political” group, because the French colonial administration oppressed any “political” tendency among Muslims, which it regarded as a dangerous opposition to the colonial order.⁸ But such a pragmatic reason does not seem enough to explain the Ulama’s active involvement in political alliances. In order to understand more clearly the question, eliminating ambiguous terminology is important. Given this, we must examine *the meaning of being “political” and being*

3. The main source of inspiration was the *Salafīya* movement of contemporary Egypt, for which Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) and his successor Rashid Rida (1865–1935) were considered as ideologues.
4. Mudīriyat al-Wathā’iq li Wilāyat Qusanṭīna, ed. *Jam’iyat al-‘ulamā’ al-muslimīn al-Jazā’irīyin: Nuṣūṣ asāsiya wa wathā’iq min 1350 ilā 1363, 1931–1944*, 2nd ed. (Constantine: Maḥbūāt Mudīriyat al-Wathā’iq li Wilāyat Qusanṭīna, 1982), 4.
5. Ali Merad, *Le Réformisme musulman en Algérie de 1925 à 1940* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 185–91. See also Mahfoud Kaddache, *Histoire du nationalisme algérien: Question nationale et politique algérienne, 1919–1951* (Algiers: EDF, 2000), 1: 391–418.
6. Kaddache, *Histoire*, 2: 617–24.
7. Kaddache, *Histoire*, 2: 803–6.
8. Merad, *Le Réformisme musulman*, 391–96.

“religious” in Algeria, in the historical context of the colonial period. To approach this question, I will analyze the discursive relation between politics and religion, first in the case of the radical nationalists, then in the case of the Ulama.

(1) *The Nationalists’ Political Militancy as Religious Militancy*

Generally speaking, Algerian radical nationalists tend to be regarded as secular thinkers.⁹ In reality, however, they did not reject the religious identity of the Algerian nation during their struggle against colonialism.

Let us take Messali Hadj, an anti-imperialist and eminent leader of the nationalist parties the ENA (1926–37), the PPA (1937–39) and the MTLD (1946–54).¹⁰ He called for the sovereignty of Algeria and its parliament, to which all Algerians, whether Muslims or European settlers, would have the right to vote regardless of race and religion. In saying so, Messali described his people, the Algerian Muslims, as follows:

The Algerian Muslims are a people who have their mother tongue, their religion, their glorious past, their thinkers, their heroes and their Islamic traditions [...] Not only is independence a natural fact that is anchored at the heart of every Algerian Muslim, but it’s a right recognized by France, when it declared at the landing at Sidi-Ferruche on 5 July 1830: “The practice of the Mahometan religion will remain free. The liberty of all classes of the inhabitants, of their religion, their property, their commerce, their industry, will not be violated. Their women will be respected... The chief general is on his honor to give his word for it.” This treaty after all is an official act for preserving not only our

9. By the term “radical nationalists” I refer to the leaders and members of the following political organizations: North African Star (ENA, 1926–37), Algerian Popular Party (PPA, 1937–39), and Movement of Triumph of Democratic Liberty (MTLD, 1946–54). This direction will finally lead to the armed resistance of the National Liberation Front (FLN), founded in 1954. The categorizing is based on Kaddache, *Histoire*, 1: 10, which divided components of the nationalist movement into (1) radicals and (2) reformists. He put the Association of the Algerian Ulama as the religious wing of the reformist groups.

10. About Messali Hadj (1898–1974), see Benjamin Stora, *Messali Hadj, 1898–1974* (Paris: Harmattan, 1986).

religion, our lands, our industry, our commerce, but also a guarantee for our national dignity and our civil personality.¹¹

Besides, among the members of the radical nationalist party MTLD (formed in 1946) there were Arabic-speaking activists who believed that being political was one of their religious duties, unlike some traditional religious leaders who declined any political activity and only practiced spiritual meditation.¹² In 1952, Mahmud Buzuzu, an MTLD activist,¹³ criticized this “phobia of the political.” He stated:

The spiritualist who is conscious of his engagement for his God should not forget that he is at the same time linked to his homeland, his people, and humanity [...] In the spirit of Islam, political militancy, whether for the defense or liberation of the homeland or for the reform of institutions, will necessarily be integrated into the vast movement of religious militancy, consisting of liberation of the human beings from all restrictions which prevent them from realizing a superior life, that is to say, the life of the representative of God on earth.¹⁴

For Buzuzu, every pious person devoted to God should feel responsible for his homeland and its people, and moreover, for all human beings.¹⁵ The gradual achievement of emancipation will pass through *God*, then *the homeland*, and finally *humanity*. For Buzuzu, there is no contradiction between politics and religion. He interprets politics as the

11. Jacques Simon, ed. *Messali Hadj par les textes* (Paris: Bouchene, 2000), 38–39.

12. Among these *Arabophones* I cite for example, Mohammed Saïd Zahiri (1900–56) and Zinaï Hadj Belkacem a. k. a. Cheikh el-Beidaoui (1903–69); both were activists of the PPA-MTLD after excluded from the Association of the Ulama, as well as Chadli el-Mekki, a delegate of the PPA in Cairo in the 1940’s, and PPA-MTLD activist and historian Mohammed Guenaneche (1915–2001).

13. Mahmud Buzuzu (1918–2007) was born in Bougie where he was brought up in a milieu near the Islamic reform movement of the Association of the Ulama. After graduating from the Official Madrasa, he worked as official Arabic teacher (*mudarris*) and was involved actively in the Muslim Boy-Scout Movement. He published a political newspaper in Arabic named al-Manâr between 1951 and 1953, receiving subsidies from the MTLD.

14. Mahmoud Bouzouzou, “Religion et Politique,” *La Voix des Jeunes*, no. 2 (May 1952): 2.

15. Mahmoud Bouzouzou, “Nos principes”, in *Le Groupe Emir Khaled de Belcourt*, ed. Mohamed Tayeb Illoul and Ali Aroua (Algiers: Dahlab, 1991), 53–65.

noble objective of the human being, what he calls “the realization of the highest good as defined by Plato and Aristotle, and religion pursues this aim in a higher sense.”¹⁶

(2) *The Ulama’s Idea of being Non-Political*

Contrary to the nationalists, the Ulama insisted on a non-political stance, even while participating in political national fronts. Let’s examine the case of the FDRL, a political alliance founded in 1951. This alliance gathered radical nationalists from (a) the MTLD, (b) the Algerian Communist Party, (c) the UDMA, a party of French-speaking elites, and (d) the Association of the Algerian Ulama. Unlike the MTLD and the Communists who both espoused the political independence of Algeria, the Ulama and the UDMA didn’t officially adopt the cause of political independence. In spite of this, Bashir Ibrahim and Larbi Tebessi, respectively the president and vice-president of the Association of the Algerian Ulama, played a coordinating role for this alliance. Ibrahim visited Paris in 1950 and then in 1951 accompanied this time by Tebessi so as to see the political situation in Paris. They finally found that it would be useful for the Ulama to establish relations with the Communists and the MTLD, in addition to the UDMA (who were previously close to the Ulama), to make the best use of atmosphere for union between different parties.¹⁷ Other than pragmatism, what were the internal motivations for the Ulama to have taken the initiative in forming this alliance, in spite of the ideological differences? Here we can cite two reasons. First was the Ulama’s claim to save the freedom of the religious community from colonial interventions. And second was their will to maintain a position *above* all other political tendencies.

In colonial Algeria, the Islamic religion represented a bond of unity

16. Bouzouzu, “Religion et Politique,” 2.

17. Rapport, 24 Novembre 1950, Dossier Cheikh Brahimi (Bachir), CAOM, SLNA, 93/4257; SLNA, “Renseignement : Union P.C.A.-U.D.M.A.-OULAMA,” n.d. [1950], Dossier Cheikh Brahimi (Bachir), CAOM, SLNA, 93/4257; SLNA, “Renseignement: Nouveau plan d’action politique de l’Association des Oulama,” n.p. [Constantine], 3 Mars 1951, CAOM, SLNA, 93/4312.

among the dominated people, because the colonial stratification system essentially based itself on one's religious status. While French citizenship was recognized for European settlers and Jews, those who had "Muslim status" were classified in a lower category, in short, that of the dominated.¹⁸ Algerian Muslims were called "indigenous," or after World War II "Muslim French." Names were different, but the meaning was the same: French subjects deprived of French civic rights.

Faced with this situation, the Ulama proclaimed solidarity among all Algerian Muslims in the name of their religion. As representative of the FDRL, vice-president of the Association of Ulama Larbi Tebessi explained the reason why the Ulama were obliged to break away from their tradition of being non-political. They participate in politics, he said, because it was colonial politics that first intervened in religion.¹⁹ By this he meant especially the colonial policies invented in order to place all Islamic practice under state control: the French administration in Algeria imposed control over religious, economic, political and social institutions peculiar to Islam by confiscating religious properties, and by nominating official Imams and Muftis as colonial agents. We can thus understand the Ulama's claim for union as a response to religious stratifications, as well as to colonial politics that imposed repressive measures on that religion.

As for the Ulama's position among political parties, I already pointed out that the Ulama faced divergence in opinion, especially with the radical nationalist parties. On the one hand, the radical party MTLD regarded the Ulama's attitude on the question of independence as too ambiguous.²⁰ On the other hand, the Ulama believed that radical nationalists of the MTLD were so dedicated to the party spirit that they are unable to cease causing wasteful divisions and conflicts between

18. Patrick Weil, "Le Statut des musulmans en Algérie coloniale: Une nationalité française dénaturée," in *La Justice en Algérie, 1830–1962*, ed. Association française pour l'histoire de la justice (Paris: La Documentation Française, 2005), 95–109. Regarding the strange coexistence of the French *mission civilisatrice* and discriminative colonial policies; see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951), 126–30.

19. "We [the Ulama] are now ready to participate in the political revivals. Because it was politics that intruded religion." "Mu'tamar jam'iyat al-'ulamā," *al-Manār* (Algérie), no. 9 (October 1951): 2–3.

20. Kaddache, *Histoire*, 2: 735.

Muslims.²¹ During a local conflict between the Ulama and the MTLD in 1952 in Tebessa, Larbi Tebessi stated: “The Ulama take part in a religious association which aims for the education of the youth and the union of all Muslims. The responsibility for the conflict in question is attributed only to the MTLD.” He also added: “The realization of a sustainable union of Muslims will be possible only by a procedure for the dissolution of political parties.”²² In 1947 Ibrahimī had already said that “the Association of Ulama is above all the parties” and “its principle is higher than principles of all [the parties].”²³ In the course of the symbolic competition with political parties, the Ulama as a religious (not political) organization, singled themselves out by claiming that they were working not for the interest of an individual party, but in the name of the Algerian Muslim community.²⁴ Therefore, we can observe that the Ulama’s motivation for coordinating a political alliance among various groups was to conserve this *position* of superiority over other political parties.

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21. In criticizing the weakness of political parties in the *Mashriq* (East Arab countries), Ibrahimī, the president of the Association of Algerian Ulama, wrote the following in 1947: “We see them say that presence of many parties in an *Umma* [community] indicates that the *Umma* is awake, conscious, and ready to get its truth surely. But we see in the multiplied parties only the weakening, negation of the union, encouragement of the opponent and taking advantage of each other. The Koran refers to ‘parties’ in plural almost only in the case of conflict and defeat. For example, ‘But the sects [al-ahzāb] differ among themselves’ [19:37] or ‘But there will be put to flight even a host of confederates [al-ahzāb]’ [38:10]. On the other hand, the Koran refers to ‘party’ in singular almost only in the case of goodness and prosperity: Truly it is the Party of God [ḥizb Allah] that will achieve Felicity [58:22]. The God’s Party in the Algerian Umma is the Association of Ulama. Indeed is the Association prosperous.” See Bashir Ibrahimī, “Jam’iyat al-‘ulamā’ a’-māl-hā wa mawāqif-hā (3),” *al-Baṣā’ir*, new ser., no. 4 (29 August 1947).
22. Report from an agent of the Police of General Information in the southern frontier zone in Tebessa to the Principal Commissioner in Constantine. See “Activité du MTLD-PPA”, Tebessa, 10 Novembre 1952, CAOM, SLNA, 93/4157.
23. Ibrahimī, “Jam’iyat al-‘ulamā’ a’-māl-hā wa mawāqif-hā (3)”; Italics added.
24. The Ulama, when they published official documents representing the opinion of the association, used the formula “in the name of the Algerian Muslim Umma (community of believers).” For example, the Ulama’s petition in 1950 in favor of the separation of church and the state was submitted “in the name of the Algerian Muslim Umma”. See Jam’iyat al-‘ulamā’ al-Muslimīn al-Jazā’irīyīn, *Mudhakkira fī qaḍīyat faṣl al-dīn ‘an al-ḥukūma qaddama-hā majlis idāra al-jam’iya bi ism al-umma al-Jazā’irīya al-muslima ilā al-majlis al-Jazā’iri* (Algiers: Jules Carbonel, n.d. [1950]).

(3) *Religion as Autonomous Sphere within a Society*

As we observed above, there was also a basic difference between the Ulama and the nationalists with respect to the understanding of religion. The nationalists considered religion as the individual identity of every Muslim—even if this individual identity is also supposed to become communal and even universal in the final stage, as Buzuzu stated. Thus there is no need for nationalists to call for a privileged religious class, such as the Ulama.

On the other hand, the Ulama understood religion not only as individual faith but also as a collective identity, for which they themselves play a symbolic role. Even if the Algerian Ulama have derived its legitimacy from the idea that represent the welfare of the religious community (*al-Umma* in Arabic),²⁵ what happened here should have been much more complex.

That is, the Ulama's refusal to involve themselves in any "political" affairs meant that the Algerian Ulama supposed an autonomous religious sphere, which functions independently from a political sphere.

Talal Asad states that the word "*al-mānī* (secular)" is a very new word in Arabic, having been introduced only in the latter part of the 19th century.²⁶ This is because, he observes, the notion of the "secular" itself is very modern: formations of the "secular" corresponded to those of the "religious", which should be strictly separated from the "secular" sphere of society, making this principal of separation a premise of the modern nation-state.²⁷ Every Arab or Muslim region witnessed the process of "modernization", the most prominent evidence of which was the formation of the "secular" republic in Turkey (1923) and the abolishment of Caliphate in Istanbul (1924).²⁸

25. See the article of Mubarak el-Mili claiming that the Association of Algerian Ulama was an Association of the Algerian Umma, because it was more adequate than the colonial government to realize good for the Algerian Umma. See el-Mili, "Jam'iyat al-'ulamā' bayna al-umma wa al-ḥukūma," *al-Baṣā'ir*, no. 92 (24 December 1937): 1–2.

26. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 206.

27. Asad, *Formations*, 191, 200–1.

28. The Question of the Caliphate caused the most vigorous discussion among the Ulama in the world. See for example, Ali Abd al-Raziq's very polemic *al-Islām wa uṣūl al-ḥukm*

On the latter question, Ibn Badis wrote in 1938:

For Muslims, just like for other peoples [*umam*], there are *two dimensions* [*nāḥiyatān*]; a *politico-governmental* dimension and a *moral-social* dimension. The politico-governmental dimension belongs to affairs of independent nations [*umam*], thus this doesn't concern us today. As for the moral-social dimension, it involves all nations whether independent or not. That is because this dimension concerns the dogma, the ethics, and the behaviors of the life of a Muslim, wherever on the earth, in whatever nation he lives, to whatever authority he obeys. From an Islamic viewpoint, this purely human [moral-social] dimension would not exist without the first [politico-governmental] dimension, and without this [politico-governmental] dimension, there would not be the moral-social dimension. This is due to the need for the preservation or organization of the good of Muslims in particular but more generally of all humanity. [...]

[Although Muslims do not have any infallible religious authority corresponding to the Roman Pope for the Catholics], we have in contrast the Group of Muslims [*jamā'at al-muslimin*].²⁹ Meaning *the people of knowledge and wisdom*, they take care of Muslims' welfare from the religious and moral dimensions. These people decide after mutual consultations what would be good and right. All Islamic nations [*al-umam al-islāmīya*] should make efforts to form such a group themselves, *keeping separate from the political and from any intervention of governments*, whether it is an Islamic government or not.³⁰

We can see how the Algerian Ulama recognized the differentiation between the political and spiritual dimensions of the lives of Muslims

(1925), and also Rashid Rida's articles published under the title of "al-Aḥkām al-shar'īya al-muta'alliqa bi al-khlāfa al-Islāmīya" in *al-Manār* magazine between 1922 and 1923.

29. Rashid Rida, one of the most influential Islamic ideologues among the contemporaries of the Algerian Ulama, identified the word "al-jamā'a" to "the people of command" (ulū al-amr) and "the people who untie and tie" (ahl al-ḥall wa al-'aqd). The latter word refers especially to the Ulama. See Rashid Rida, "al-Aḥkām al-shar'īya al-muta'alliqa bi al-khlāfa al-Islāmīya," *al-Manār* 23, no. 10, (1922), and following articles.
30. Abdelhamid ibn Badis, "al-Khlāfa am jamā'at al-muslimin," *al-Shihāb* 14, no. 2 (May 1938); Italics added.

and how they defined the role of the Ulama within this secularized (and in the Algerian case, colonized) nation.³¹

Conclusion

To begin with the second question of this study, *What was the meaning of being “political” and “religious” for the Ulama and for the nationalists?*, we saw that being religious meant above all individual faith in God. This faith required a process of emancipation, which they called religious militancy, and which should pass through political struggle. Contrary to this, the Ulama understood religion also as a collective identity of the religious community [*al-Umma*], while they criticized the notion of being political as an expression of the party spirit.

To go back to our original question, *Why did the Ulama refuse to be seen as political, while they were effectively involved in political activities?*, we saw that the Ulama’s refusal to be political derived from their claim to stand *above* all political parties. Behind this self-definition of the Ulama, I pointed out the perception of *religion as independent, autonomous sphere* within a modern society. As Asad stated, the conceptual and social distinction between the “secular” and the “religious” was historically very new, and it was contemporaneous with the rise of the nation-state, of public education, of the substitution of positive laws for Islamic *Sharīa*, and other developments. The Algerian Ulama’s position toward the “religious” and the “political” should be clearly understood only by considering this crucial moment of history.

31. We can observe the same kind of reaction from the Ulama in India in the 1950’s. Commenting on the Ulama’s defense for Islamic education, which is independent from the secular one, Qasim Zaman argues that reflects “a recognition by the ‘ulama themselves of greater differentiation within society, with religion occupying a distinct, inviolable, autonomous sphere. [...] Yet the recognition of this functional differentiation does not derive from any commitment to the idea of secularization itself, but is intended rather to serve as a means of resisting or limiting the encroachments of the modern state.” Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 84.

Archival sources

CAOM: Centre des Archives d'Outre Mer (Aix-en-Provence, France)

SLNA: Fonds des Services de Liaison Nord-Africaines

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