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The Phenomenon of Orientalism in Algeria During the French Occupation Era

(The Beginning of the Occupation)

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Abstract:

Orientalism and its accompanying objectives, through the phenomenon of French colonialism in Algeria, reveal the true hidden motives of the French occupation in the region. Consequently, colonial policy often relied on the contributions of Orientalists. Notably, the French campaign in Algeria, from its inception, brought with it numerous Orientalists who had an understanding of the social, cultural, and religious structures of Islamic societies. With the occupation of Algeria, French figures emerged who sought to apply the methods and approaches of Orientalist thought, which aimed to disseminate Eastern civilization in the West. From this point, the French administration worked to facilitate the tasks of French Orientalists to solidify its policies in Algeria. Orientalist scholars in Algeria sometimes presented a favorable image for the benefit of society to win their support, particularly in the educational and cultural spheres, as a means of drawing closer to Algerians and spreading their Western Christian culture.

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Introduction:

The French administration sought to provide all facilitations to the prominent figures of the French Orientalist movement in Algeria. Thus, French Orientalism played an active role in achieving the objectives pursued by the French administration in Algeria. Orientalists focused on the cultural aspects of Algeria and employed various means to do so. Notably, the French campaign in Algeria included many specialists in Orientalism who had a deep understanding of Islamic societies. The French administration aimed to employ them and provide suitable conditions for their activities to draw closer to Algerian society and understand their way of life.

With the launch of Orientalist studies, a large group of Orientalists emerged, bringing with them various methods and approaches to study Algerian society, especially with the establishment and diversification of schools. These schools aimed to achieve what France had been striving for over many years, particularly the so-called "spread of Western civilization," which served as a cover for the occupation of Algeria. From this, we understand the true nature of Orientalism, which, in reality, was a facade for colonialism or the other face of French colonialism in Algeria. It worked to spread French Christian culture and attempted to "Frenchify" society to erase the markers of national identity, including language, religion, history, customs, traditions, and the diverse cultures within Algerian society, with its rich civilizational diversity.

So, did Orientalism and its proponents succeed in achieving their colonial goals?

1. Definition of Orientalism:

A. Linguistic Definition:

The term "Orientalism" (الاستشراق) is a compound word derived from "the East" (الشرق) with the addition of extra letters (الهمزة والسين والتاء - ا س ت), which, according to Arabic grammar rules, imply the act of seeking something. Therefore, "Orientalism" linguistically means "seeking the East."

The term "East" (الشرق), as mentioned in *Lisan al-Arab* under the root "شرق," is associated with the phrase "شرقت الشمس" (the sun rose). The verb "شرقت" means "to rise" (طلعت), and the noun "المشرق" refers to the place of sunrise. For example, in a hadith narrated by Ibn Abbas, it is mentioned: "He prohibited prayer after dawn until the sun rises (تشرق الشمس)."

It is said: "شرقت الشمس" when the sun rises, and "أشرقت" when it illuminates. If the intention is the act of rising, it is mentioned in another hadith: "until the sun rises (تطلع الشمس)." If the intention is illumination, it is mentioned in yet another hadith: "until the sun rises and illuminates (ترتفع الشمس والإضاءة مع الارتفاع)."[1]

Linguistically, "Orientalism" is derived from the root "شرق." It is said: "شرقت الشمس" when the sun rises, meaning the place of sunrise. The "East" (الشرق) is the opposite of the "West" (الغرب), and "الشروق" refers to the act of rising. It is said that anything that rises from the East has "شرق."

The term "التشريق" refers to moving toward the East. It is said: "How different are the East and the West!" (شتان بين مشرق ومغرب), and "شرقوا" means they went to the East or came from the East. Everything that rises from the East has "شرق."[2]

Thus, the "East" symbolizes a specific spatial region of the universe, namely the East.

"Orientalism" is a verbal noun (مصدر) derived from the six-letter augmented verb "استشرق," which itself is derived from the root "شرق," augmented with three letters (الألف والسين والتاء). According to grammarians, these letters imply the act of seeking something. In this construction, it means "seeking the East." In Arabic, "الشرق" is defined as: " شرقت الشمس تشرق شُروقاً وشرقاً: طَلَعَتْ، وَاسْمُ الْمَوْضِعِ المَشْرِق ... وشَرَّقوا : ذَهَبُوا إِلَى الشَّرْقِ أَو أَتَوُا الشَّرْقَ."

In modern Arabic dictionaries, the term "Orientalism" (استشراق) is defined as: the care and attention given to the affairs, culture, and languages of the East. In Western dictionaries, it is defined as: "the science of Eastern things or the appreciation of Eastern things."[3]

B. Technical Definition:

Orientalism refers to all the studies and research conducted by Westerners about the history and civilization of the East in various fields—religious, social, cultural, economic, and political—with the aim of identifying strengths to weaken and penetrate them, and identifying weaknesses to exploit them. The ultimate goal is to subjugate the East and dominate it[4].

Researchers have not agreed on a specific historical starting point for Orientalism. This is likely because Orientalist studies predated the term "Orientalism" (orientalisme) by a long time, spanning nearly a thousand years.

In brief, Orientalism can be described as: studies conducted by Westerners on the heritage of the East, particularly everything related to its history, languages, literature, arts, sciences, traditions, and customs[5].

"...We must therefore consider the meaning attached to the term 'Orientalism,' derived from the word 'East' (شرق), which means the

place where the sun rises. Thus, 'Orientalism' can be understood as the science of the East or the science of the Eastern world."

"It is the study by Westerners of the history, nations, languages, literature, sciences, customs, beliefs, and myths of the East."

"It is a mode of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between the East and, most often, the West."

"The concept of Orientalism refers to Western studies related to the Islamic East, encompassing its languages, literature, history, beliefs, legislations, and civilization in general[6]."

Orientalism is an intellectual movement concerned with the study of Islam and Muslims. It encompasses all studies produced by Westerners that address issues related to Islam and Muslims, including matters of faith, the Sunnah, Sharia, history, and other areas of Islamic studies.

It is also said to refer to the intellectual current represented by various studies on the Islamic East, covering its civilization, religions, literature, languages, and culture. This current has contributed to shaping Western perceptions of the East in general and the Islamic world in particular, reflecting the intellectual background of the civilizational conflict between them.

Dr. Jaber Qumayha stated that Orientalism refers to the studies conducted by Westerners on the history, nations, sciences, customs, beliefs, and myths of the East.

From the above, it becomes clear to me that Orientalism is the intellectual movement that focused on studying the various sciences of the Islamic East in all their diverse forms[7].

Orientalism today is not the same as Orientalism of the past. What we mean today by the term "Orientalism" differs from its initial

linguistic concept and its original emergence. The concept has evolved and expanded, no longer confined to that narrow definition.

Today, Orientalism is a school, a science, a policy, and an economy, especially when the "East" refers to Islam as a civilization, faith, heritage, and nation.

When we speak of "Orientalism" today, we do not mean its linguistic definition but rather its narrow technical meaning, which refers to "the interest of Western scholars in Islamic and Arabic studies, as well as the methodologies, schools, trends, and objectives of these scholars."

Orientalism is deeply connected to the historical legacy of the Western perspective on Arab and Islamic civilization. This legacy is burdened with psychological accumulations and dominant, pressing feelings that influence the movement of thought and shape behaviors and attitudes[8].

2. Definition of Orientalists:

The term "Orientalists" (المستشرقون) is the plural of "Orientalist" (مستشرق), referring to any Western, non-Muslim writer or scholar who writes about the East, its essence, Islamic thought, and Islamic civilization. If the writer is a Muslim, whether Western or Eastern, they are not considered an Orientalist. Over time, the term "Orientalist" came to be applied to those who did not embrace Islam and did not speak Arabic as a native language, yet they researched the heritage of the East, including its languages and literature. Even if they were geographically Eastern, such as Russian or Japanese scholars, they were still termed Orientalists.

Some went even further, applying the label of "Orientalist" not only to Russian and Japanese Easterners but also to Arab Easterners, such as Russians, Iraqis, Egyptians, and others. The

term was extended to anyone who wrote about the East while being influenced by Orientalists, even if they were Easterners or non-Muslim Arabs. For example, Muhammad al-Bahi included figures like the Lebanese Qustantin Zuraiq, the Egyptian Aziz Atiya, and the Iraqi Majid Khoury among the Orientalists. Similarly, Abdel Rahman Badawi, in his book *The Encyclopedia of Orientalists*, included some Arab Christian scholars as Orientalists, as did Mustafa al-Siba'i in his book *Orientalism and the Orientalists*[9].

An Orientalist, therefore, is a Westerner who studies the heritage of the East and everything related to it, including its sciences, languages, arts, and civilization. Thus, Orientalism refers to studies conducted by non-Easterners on the heritage of the East. If we adopt the broad definition of Orientalism, what concerns us, as Dr. Mahmoud Hamdy Zaqzouq states, is the specific meaning of Orientalism, which refers to Western studies related to the Islamic East, encompassing its languages, literature, history, beliefs, legislations, and civilization in general. This is the meaning that comes to mind in the Arab and Islamic world when the terms "Orientalism" or "Orientalist" are used, and it is also the common usage in the writings of relevant Orientalists[10].

The beginnings of Orientalist studies were focused on the study of Islam, its civilizations, the Arabic language, and its literature. However, over time, these studies expanded to include languages, customs, and more, while the Islamic religion continued to attract the attention of Orientalists.

Thus, **Orientalism** is a comprehensive field of study based on examining the material and spiritual aspects of Eastern civilization, encompassing economics, history, geography,

politics, literature, philosophy, religions, arts, ethnography, and more.

From this definition, it becomes clear that the West (Orientalists) directed their attention and care toward Eastern heritage in both its material and spiritual forms. They left no field untouched, studying and analyzing it with precision and diligence. Orientalism has been known since ancient times as a prominent manifestation of the intellectual interactions and conflicts between the East and the West. In this way, Orientalism became a tool of knowledge for Western civilization.

As for the **Orientalist**, they are the scholar well-versed in the knowledge of the East, its languages, and its literature. Therefore, Orientalism is the field, and the Orientalist is the practitioner within it.

For this reason, the term "Orientalist" has been applied to any researcher specializing in Eastern literature, Eastern languages, the history of an Eastern country, or those interested in sociological or anthropological studies of Eastern peoples.

The term "Orientalist" first appeared in the English language in 1779 and in the French language in 1799[11].

As for **Malik Bennabi (1983, p. 130)**, he defines the term "Orientalism" in an article titled *The Production of Orientalists*, stating: "By Orientalists, we mean Western writers who write about Islamic thought and Islamic civilization[12]."

The Orientalist is anyone who studies, writes about, or researches the East, and everything this Orientalist does is referred to as Orientalism[13].

The term "Orientalist," in its general sense, is applied to any Western scholar engaged in the study of the entire East, its far,

middle, and near regions—including its languages, literature, civilizations, and religions[14].

3. French Orientalism in Algeria:

The interest of Orientalists in Algeria began even before the French campaign, whether by the French or other European nations. However, the deterioration of relations between Algeria and France in 1827 and France's preparations for a campaign against Dey Hussein led French Orientalists to focus their attention on Algeria, translating works by American and English Orientalists about the region[15].

This interest intensified after the occupation of Tunisia and Morocco, as it became imperative to understand the language, history, and Islam of the region. As a result, numerous Arabic texts were translated and published, which brought a group of French scholars to prominence in the field of Orientalism through their works and contributions. Here, we will briefly mention a few notable figures from French Orientalism, as the list is extensive[16].

The **"School of Algiers"** was a significant milestone in the journey of Orientalism in Algeria. According to Abu al-Qasim Saadallah, the term "School of Algiers" was used by some to describe the influence of Algeria on French literature, coloring it with the hues and flavors of its environment. However, in this context, the term is used to denote the emergence of French Orientalism and scientific studies, particularly after 1879, when the Higher School of Letters was established. This institution later became the Faculty of Letters at the University of Algiers in 1909.

It is a **school of thought** that influenced art, literature, language, history, and the relationships between Algerians and the French.

Above all, it unleashed French Orientalism, allowing it to support colonial efforts in Algeria and other Maghreb countries[17].

French Orientalism, or the French Orientalist School in Algeria, is considered the most influential and interactive Orientalist school with the Islamic world in general and Algeria in particular. This is due to several factors, the most important of which are:

- The French collective memory retains painful historical events that made them more eager for revenge and the restoration of their lost glory by dominating these regions.
- One of the most significant events etched in the minds of the French was their confrontation with Muslims during the Islamic conquests in Europe.
- France also led the Western Crusades.
- It acquired most of the territories of the Ottoman Empire after its dissolution, in addition to the intersection of its interests with the Arab world, especially Algeria. France explicitly expressed its desire to keep Algeria under its permanent control and influence, driven by greed for its wealth and strategic location.

In other words, French Orientalism carries within it the nature of religious conflict. Its constant and continuous interaction with Islam and Muslims generated deep-seated resentments, which found in Orientalist studies a comprehensive mechanism to achieve all its goals[18].

During the military campaign against Algeria in 1830, the French did not bring only cannons, ships, and soldiers—they also brought Orientalists as a tool and mechanism to facilitate occupation and entrench cultural invasion and civilizational dependency[19].

Thus, the journey of Orientalism in Algeria began alongside the occupation, attempting to penetrate the depths of Algerian society,

interrogating it culturally, civilizationaly, and heritage-wise. The goal was to understand its way of thinking, the nature of its beliefs, its living conditions, and its strengths and weaknesses, making it easier for the colonial military administration to tighten its control over it[20].

4. The Goals of Orientalism:

The goals of Orientalism can be divided into three categories[21]:

A. A Suspicious Scientific Goal:

This aims to:

- Cast doubt on the authenticity of the message of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), its divine origin, and the heavenly nature of the Quran.
- Deny that Islam is a religion from God, claiming instead that it is a fabrication derived from Judaism and Christianity.
- Question the authenticity of the Hadith (Prophetic traditions) that our verified scholars have relied upon.
- Undermine the intrinsic value of Islamic jurisprudence, that vast legal system unparalleled by any other nation in any era.
- Doubt the ability of the Arabic language to keep pace with scientific progress.

These scientific goals pursued by Orientalists represent a form of intellectual and literary colonialism. They strive with all their might to achieve these aims in order to undermine this divine, heavenly religion, which Allah Almighty has guaranteed to preserve.

C. A Religious-Political Goal:

This can be summarized as follows:

- To make Muslims doubt their Prophet, their Quran, their Sharia, and their jurisprudence. This serves both religious and colonial objectives.
- To weaken Muslims' confidence in their heritage and sow seeds of doubt in the values, beliefs, and ideals they hold dear.
- To make Muslims question the value of their civilizational heritage, claiming that Islamic civilization is borrowed from Roman civilization.
- To weaken the spirit of Islamic brotherhood among Muslims across different regions by reviving pre-Islamic nationalisms and stirring up conflicts and divisions among their peoples.

D. Purely Scientific Goals:

These are aimed solely at research and scrutiny. However, this category is rare and uncommon.

Therefore, among the primary goals that French Orientalism sought to achieve in Algeria were: distorting Islam, casting doubt on it by corrupting and misrepresenting the Arabic language, marginalizing it, and inciting nationalist and regional divisions to fragment and weaken national unity. This was done to dismantle society, making it easier to destroy by planting and encouraging Westernized elites and spreading Western culture.

Most historical studies confirm that the majority of Orientalists in the Islamic world, particularly in Algeria, were spies and military personnel embedded within Algerian society. Their primary mission was to pave the way for French colonialism by spreading news or promoting it as a civilizing mission for the benefit of the colonized peoples[22].

However, the connection of these intellectuals and Orientalists to the colonial administration—either as employees or as carriers of

its expansionist ideology—enabled them to promote ideas that facilitated French colonialism in Algeria. These ideas targeted the fundamental pillars of Algerian society, such as religion, language, history, attitudes toward civilization and urbanization, and women's issues.

The French came to Algeria with a set of complexes accumulated by Europeans since the Middle Ages regarding Arabs, Muslims, and the East in general. The ideologies of the Crusades were still alive in their minds, fueled by the Islamic presence in Andalusia and the Ottoman dominance over Eastern Europe and Algeria[23].

Orientalists also played a significant role in providing the colonial administration with comprehensive knowledge and information about the various layers of Algerian society. This was achieved through ethnographic and anthropological studies, as well as efforts to collect manuscripts, reinterpret them, and translate them into French[24].

The French occupation administration worked tirelessly to colonize the Algerian mind. An examination of the general policy adopted by the French authorities in the cultural sphere reveals that they sought to eradicate the prevailing intellectual and cultural reality by erasing the foundations of Algerian identity. This was done to keep the Algerian people ignorant, alienate them from their religious and intellectual heritage, and destroy the fundamental pillars of their society in the fields of education, culture, the Arabic language, and Arab-Islamic customs and traditions. This made it easier for them to "Frenchify" the natives or strip them of their identity, achieving their colonial and settler objectives.

Perhaps the most terrifying danger faced by the Algerian people during the occupation was the threat of enslavement, literally

dissolving the Algerian identity within the European settler society and permanently severing it from its Arab-Islamic roots through various policies and mechanisms[25].

Conclusion:

France employed every possible means in its policy to control Algerian society, and the phenomenon of Orientalism reflects the true nature of this colonialism. French Orientalism penetrated Algerian society, understood its foundations, and sought to transition this people to new Western foundations, integrating them into Western culture. This was done to achieve the goal of annexing Algeria to France. However, France failed in its colonial policies, whether in its attempts at Christianization, the "Frenchification" of Algerian society, or the spread of its Western civilization. This failure was due to the resilience and unity of the Algerian people and the efforts of the national elite to preserve the national identity, despite the resources France provided to its Orientalists. The Algerian people rejected these policies.

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