

BilqasimSa`dallah: an Historian with Wide Experience and Strong Local Roots



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Dr. BilqasimSa`dallah was remarkably energetic in his projects in research and writing on the history of Algeria. His great energy came in part from his realization that the French colonial power had been trying to portray the Algerians as isolated, backward people who had little if any knowledge of the wider world, and could only make progress through accepting French culture. He would have been well aware of the harsh measures the French took against independent Muslim scholars: in his home town of El Oued, Shaikh `Abd al-`Aziz Bin al-Hashimi, was put in jail by the French authorities in 1938, and kept there for 21 months, then prevented from returning to El Oued until 1947. He came from a family of leaders of the

Qadiriyya Sufi order, but rallied to the support of the Association of `Ulama in 1937, and brought important financial support to the organization, angering the French. A century earlier, his grandfather had supported Amir `Abd al-Qadir.

Dr. Sa`adallah knew that Algerians were frequent travelers, moving both within their country and to distant places, and, in the process, developing ties in other communities and learning about the intellectual, cultural, and social traditions and developments of a wide variety of settings. People from El Oued, and the surrounding Souf oasis region often went for work, commerce, or study to Constantine, or Tunis, or into Tripolitania. When he went off to study at the Zaytuna in Tunis

in 1947, he would have found a large Souafa community.

Dr. Sa`dallah begins the introduction to what would become a nine volume work, Ta`rikh al Jaza`ir al-thaqafi with a remark made in 1960 by Muhammad al-Bashir al-Ibrahimi, a leader of the Association of Algerian `Ulama, that the young Bilqasim Sa`adallah seemed infatuated with pursuing the study of his country's complex history. Ibrahimi was a good example of that complexity, having grown up in a rural community in eastern Algeria, then fleeing the French demand for military conscription on the eve of the First World War, going to the Hijaz, and then to Damascus where Algerian exiles played an extraordinary role in cultural and intellectual revitalization of Arab and Islamic society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

When Algeria regained its independence in 1962, after seven years of struggle, Sa`adallah was faced with the question of where to pursue his ambitious project of study. He chose to go to the University

of Minnesota in the United States. To understand this choice, it is important to know that John F. Kennedy was then the president. He had grand visions of the United States as a country that could contribute to progress and justice around the world. On July 2, 1957, he delivered a speech in the United States Senate supporting Algerian independence, as well as independence for other European colonies in Africa. He was sharply criticized by French leaders, and by American politicians and journalists who feared that anti-colonial movements would lead to the spread of communism. Yet Kennedy stood his ground, and three years later was elected president. Soon after Algeria gained its independence in July 1962, his brother Robert paid a visit to Algiers.

As president, John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps, an organization that would allow idealistic young Americans to travel around the world, engaging in projects to bring development and prosperity to people in Third World countries who until recently had been exploited by European colonial

powers. Kennedy's sympathy for the Algerian cause was linked to his awareness of how his own relatives, Catholics in Ireland, had gone through a long struggle against the British government to gain the right to self-determination, which was granted after the First World War, in 1922.

President Kennedy's support of independence movements no doubt was a factor that helped draw Bilqasim Sa'dallah to the University of Minnesota in the Fall of 1962, just after Algeria had finally won its independence. While there, he discovered that American universities had a wide range of resources in their libraries, books and journals from around the world. He completed his doctoral thesis on the rise of Algerian nationalism from 1900 to 1930, and he went on to a teaching position at Wisconsin State University Eau Claire, in 1966. His first year of teaching there was quite turbulent. President Kennedy had been assassinated in November 1963, and there was no other leading figure who had his skill in articulating a vision of universal human rights. A widespread

fear of communism soon drove America's engagement in the war in Vietnam. By 1966, the movement of students opposing the Vietnam war was growing rapidly. And then in June of 1967 came the Six Day War when the Israeli military took over Palestinian territories. Algeria broke off diplomatic relations with the United States, and Dr. Sa'dallah returned to Algeria to bring home his extraordinary skills as a researcher and teacher.

But leaders in both Algeria and the United States could see that there were good reasons for finding ways to work together, particularly in developing Algeria's recently nationalized oil industry, and in providing Algerian students with access to the high level scientific and technical education they would need to develop their country. By 1974, Dr. Sa'dallah returned to the United States, visiting Dr. Richard Mitchell at the University of Michigan. Dr. Mitchell came from a family of Lebanese immigrants, and had served in the American Marines during World War II, fighting against Japanese imperial expansion in the Pacific. He went on to pursue a

graduate degree in Middle East history at Princeton University, a prominent “Ivy League” school that traditionally catered to upper class Americans, not the sons of immigrants from outside of northern Europe. But the United States was then in the midst of complex, far reaching change. He went to do research in Egypt in the early 1950s, a time of great turbulence as the old monarchy was falling and Egypt was making a transition to Arab nationalism, and a more aggressive stance to the old colonial powers, and to Israel. He wrote his thesis on the Muslim Brotherhood, and it was published as a book, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, by Oxford University Press, in 1969. It came to be recognized as one of the most original and influential books on the Middle East by an American scholar, a book that did not advocate a particular point of view, but focused on developing an historical understanding of complex issues.

Since Dr. Mitchell and Dr. Sa’dallah both shared experience in the vibrant, turbulent setting of Cairo in the 1950s, they had much in common. I was

a graduate student at the time, working under the supervision of Dr. Mitchell. I had recently returned from two years spent as an English teacher at a lycée in Annaba, Algeria, where I had seen the beginnings of the program of Arabization, and I had seen that for many students pursuing their study in Arabic, and learning a foreign language other than French had great appeal. Dr. Sa’adallah encouraged me to do research on the role of Islam in Algeria, and I went on to do my thesis on Muslim law courts during the colonial era, eventually published as *Muslim Law Courts and the French Colonial State in Algeria* (Princeton University Press, 1985).

Dr. Sa’adallah returned episodically to the University of Minnesota and the University of Michigan to take advantage of their library resources. He completed his work on the first volume of *Ta’rikh al-Jaza’ir al-thaqafi* while he was at the University of Michigan, in March of 1979. By this time, I had gone to take up a teaching position at Bayero University in Kano, the largest city in predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria, where

Dr. Mitchell had also developed some ties. This experience, in a quite different environment than Algeria, helped me to gain a better understanding of Algeria by putting it into a comparative perspective. I owe a great deal to Dr. Mitchell first for encouraging my work on Algeria, then helping me to transition to northern Nigeria.

By this time, Dr. Mitchell was having increasingly difficult experience. Discussion of the Middle East in the United States was becoming increasingly polarized, as a result of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. Dr. Mitchell attempted to promote dialogue, but with little success. In some of the Egyptian media, he was criticized as serving American interests. He was deeply upset by the conflicts in his ancestral homeland of Lebanon which brought American and French military intervention in 1982, as well as an Israeli invasion. He died of cancer in a hospital in Cairo on September 12, 1983.

Fortunately, Dr. Sa`adallah continued to thrive and carry on his amazingly energetic work for another thirty years, and he sent copies of his publications

to me, first in Kano, then in the small city of Pocatello, Idaho, in a remote corner of the American west, where I taught at Idaho State University. One thing I learned from reading Professor Sa`dallah's work was the importance of understanding each person as an individual, who came from a particular place, and went through particular experiences at particular times. This was to prove a key element in writing my recent book, *Algerians without Borders: the Making of a Global Frontier Society* (University Press of Florida, 2011).

When a person has strong roots, as Dr. Sa`adallah certainly did, this makes it possible to maintain a sense of continuity, even when moving between such different settings as the town of Guemmar in the oasis complex around El Oued, to Tunis, to Cairo, to Minnesota and Michigan, and to Algiers. I travelled to El Oued during my lycée's spring holiday in 1972. I found it a remarkable setting. I remember it through a photo I took of an elderly man in traditional dress who seemed to be telling a story, in a very lively manner, to men and boys of all ages who had gathered around

him. It helps me to understand how Dr. Sa`adallah remained connected to his roots through all of his travel, and how he had such talent at telling stories of Algeria's past..

And how can we pursue Dr. Sa`adallah's inspiration in the future? Digital technology presents many opportunities and challenges. An Arabic website has already been set up focusing on Dr. Sa`adallah's work (<http://www.aboulkacemsaadallah.com/>). It will require considerable skill to work out a way to connect internet searches on the names of people he discusses or events and developments that he covered in his publications to specific places in those publications. It would also be important to translate some of his works into other languages, especially English, so that students and scholars concerned with learning about the Middle East and North Africa who do not know Arabic can benefit from his remarkable scholarship.

Biographie :

Allan Christelow is a specialist in the history of Islam in North and West Africa. His field experience began as a high school English teacher in the North African country of Algeria in the early 1970s. He completed a doctoral dissertation on the history of Muslim courts in Algeria at the University of Michigan in 1977, and then spent five years teaching at Bayero University in Kano, the largest city in predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria, in West Africa. Christelow has published books on the application of Islamic law in both Algeria and Nigeria, and he has delivered invited presentations at many major U.S. universities, including Stanford, Notre Dame, Yale, and Northwestern, and in nine different countries, including Holland, (Israel) , Algeria, and South Africa. He has taught at Idaho State University since 1983. In 2011, the University Press of Florida published his book *Algerians without Borders*, which is a study of the experience of Algerian emigrants and refugees from the eighteenth century to the present.

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