

The political thought of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema 1931-1936

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Abstract:

The Algerian national movement underwent profound transformations and reached a high level of maturity at the beginning of the 20th century, influenced by its absorption of nationalist ideas and global cultures. This evolution was reflected in its programs and demands, which became more coherent regarding Algerian issues, as evidenced by the political activity of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars.

This research paper aims to examine the political activity of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema, although it is a religious and educational association, starting from the reform program of the ulema, which included political activity as a religious requirement and a national necessity, even if this was not an explicit slogan and in a direct way, in order to protect the association against any obstruction to its projects.

Key words : Association of Muslim Scholars; Algeria; political thought; nationalism; colonial policy.

Introduction:

The 1930s in colonial Algeria were marked by intense political activity, illustrated by the various political formations of the time and their diverse actions, particularly with the rise to power of the Popular Front in France and its initial openness to the demands of the Algerian political class. Among these

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formations was the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars, founded on May 5, 1931, at the Al-Taraqqi Club in Algiers.

Under the leadership of Sheikh Abdul Hamid bin Badis, this movement was a continuation of the Algerian reform movement. Its political thought during the period 1931-1936 was characterized by a "reformist educational thought with a national political dimension", focused on strengthening the Arab-Islamic national identity in the face of French colonialism.

The Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars engaged in intense political activity from its founding in 1931, despite its founding charter defining it as a religious and educational association. Its leaders, notably Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis, considered religious and educational reform a necessary prerequisite for achieving political independence.

As we mentioned earlier, the Popular Front came to power in France and showed some openness to the demands of the Algerian political class, which had united for the first time at a historic meeting held in the capital in June 1936. This meeting was known as the Islamic Conference. A group of French historians deliberately sowed discord between religious and political movements in the history of contemporary Algeria. Their primary concern was to minimize the role of Islam in the national movement and the liberation revolution. While the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars never claimed to be the sole movement that contributed to raising awareness among Algerians, historians agree that it played a leading role in the revival of the religion and the Arabic language, and that it enabled Algerians to rediscover their historical identity.

What, then, was the role of the reform movement within the national movement? Was the League of Scholars truly an association advocating coexistence with the occupier, indifferent to Algerian independence? How can we explain some of the positions adopted by the League of Scholars in the

face of the accusations leveled against it during this difficult trial? This is a historical question that must be studied using the historical method, based primarily on reliable documents and testimonies, This article aims to answer a series of questions in light of the preceding ideas, namely: what is Professor Ibn Badis's conception of homeland? What is the link between homeland and patriotism? What are the constituent elements of patriotism?

1. Creation and objectives of the Association:

The Association is considered an extension of the reform movement led by Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis, which aimed to resist the effects of French colonialism and to consolidate the foundations of Algerian identity in its Islamic dimension¹, Six years after the association was founded, Ibn Badis took the initiative to write a charter for the association, describing "the mission and principles of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars", and published it in the magazine "Al-Shihab" on June 11, 1937².

The Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars defined the objectives it aimed to achieve in a publication of the association, published by Sheikh Ibn Badis in the newspaper Al-Basair, number 160, dated April 7, 1939³, The association's objectives include "education and instruction, the purification of Islam from heresies and superstitions, and the rekindling of the flame of enthusiasm in hearts after the occupation did everything to extinguish it in order to break Algerian resistance."⁴, To revive and disseminate Arab culture after the colonizer has tried to suppress it, to preserve Algerian identity with its civilizational, religious and historical foundations, and to resist the occupation policy aimed at eliminating it⁵.

To achieve these goals, the association established sections at the national level, reaching 58 sections in 1938. The association worked to widely disseminate the Arabic language, revive

Arab-Islamic culture in Algeria, and revive Arab-Islamic history⁶.

The association sought to instill a sense of national pride in Algerians in the face of the occupation policy⁷, She endeavored to prepare an elite group of men and women to form the pillars of the Algerian renaissance, and to this end, she reformed educational methods and teaching approaches, and revised school textbooks⁸.

The association also organised educational missions for graduates of its schools and institutes in the eastern Arab world, and paid particular attention to the education provided in mosques⁹, Programs were established to disseminate religious and Arabic education to young beginners and to address the gaps in knowledge among students educated in French. The association also worked with adults, offering them courses in preaching, guidance, and literacy¹⁰.

The Association of Scholars did not limit its educational work to Algeria; it extended its activities to France to support the children of Algerian immigrants. The Association gave special attention to women in its programs, organizing classes for them in mosques and encouraging the removal of obstacles to their education and training¹¹.

In addition to its work in education, the association was known for its opposition to the naturalization policy, having issued a fatwa declaring those who acquired French nationality and abandoned the precepts of Islamic law to be infidels. This fatwa followed calls made by some Algerians who had studied in French colonial schools¹².

The association founded several newspapers to disseminate its principles and monitor developments in the country after its establishment. These included Al-Sunnah Al-Nabawiyyah, Al-Shari'ah Al-Muhammadiyah, Al-Sirat Al-Sawi, and Al-Basair, the latter of which is still published today. The association was successively led by Abdelhamid Ben Badis, Bashir Al-Ibrahimi,

Ahmed Hamani, Ali Maghribi, Abdelrahman Shaiban, and Abdelrazak Qasoum¹³.

2- The Association's Slogan and Ideological Foundations:

The Association launched its famous slogan: "Islam is our religion, Arabic is our language, Algeria is our homeland." This slogan was not merely religious and cultural rhetoric. The Association firmly opposed France's attempts to erase national identity and issued a famous fatwa declaring those who had acquired French nationality and abandoned Sharia law to be infidels¹⁴. This was, in reality, a clear political stance rejecting

- *. Francophonie: Attempts to distort Algerian identity

- *. Integration: It was demanded by certain political movements, which emphasized the specificity of Algerian identity in its relationship to French identity¹⁵.

- *. Nationalism based on reform (politics through education): Sheikh Ibn Badis was among the first to address the issue of nationalism at a time when discussing it was forbidden, even dangerous. This was in 1925, when he launched his newspaper "Al-Naqid" (The Critic), adopting the slogan: "Truth above all, and the homeland first.¹⁶", The homeland, as defined by Ibn Badis, is: "A land that God created from the nation and granted to it, and of which it is the mistress and owner by legitimate and natural right, whether some recognize it or deny it."¹⁷

Ibn Badis and the association believed that "true politics" begins with reform and raising awareness among individuals. Therefore, during its early years (1931-1936), the association focused on educational and cultural activities, which the colonial authorities considered an indirect form of political activity because:

- *. Reviving national consciousness: In addition to education in schools, the Association of Ulama focused its efforts on preaching to the people in mosques, sending groups of

preachers and guides, which the colonial authorities considered "political delegations." The Association took care to announce the names of these groups in the newspaper "Al-Basair," as well as the regions in which they were active¹⁸.

* To fight against Sufi orders loyal to France (superstitions and practices)¹⁹.

* Education: Opening of schools and publication of newspapers (such as "Al-Shihab" and "Al-Basair") to disseminate national thought and the Arabic language. The association considered education to be the method best suited to the tastes and temperaments of scholars, as it was their preferred weapon, which they never abandoned and through which they constantly strove to develop²⁰. Some French reports have counted around 40,000 students enrolled in the association's clubs, with an equal number of boys and girls, which indicates the pioneering role of this association of scholars in the education of girls and the fact that it has restored this issue to its rightful place, since the right to education has been guaranteed to girls since the beginnings of Islam²¹.

The Association of Scholars depended mainly on donations from Algerian benefactors and published the funds received in the newspaper "Al-Basair", in addition to acquiring public baths, Andalusian cafes and cinemas, in a move towards financial independence²². Sheikh Abdul Rahman Shaiban viewed these schools as the product of a Ministry of Popular Education, as bastions of patriotism, where the psychology of students was cultivated by instilling in them hostility towards France²³.

3- Evolution of Political Thought (1936)

The year 1936 was marked by a transformation in the association's political thought, which shifted from educational activities to direct political engagement, notably through:

Its participation in the First Islamic Conference (1936): where it contributed to the formulation of unified national demands (rejection of assimilation, religious freedom, and the teaching of Arab²⁴, This conference marked the association's first public and direct entry into the political arena, where it participated with various national forces in formulating political and social demands submitted to the French government²⁵.

The Islamic Conference was held on June 7, 1936 in Algiers, at the Majestic cinema (now the Atlas cinema) in the Bab El Oued district, under unique internal and external circumstances²⁶.

A- Domestic and international developments:

- The founding of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars in 1931.
- The founding of the Algerian Communist Party in 1936.
- The rise of the Federation of Elected Algerian Muslim Representatives and its success in the 1934 municipal elections.
- The Popular Front's rise to power and the implementation of its reform projects, notably the Blum-Viollette Plan²⁷.
- Several Islamic conferences have taken place, including the Caliphate Conference in Cairo, the Conference of European Muslims in Geneva, and the Islamic Conference in Jerusalem²⁸.
- Algerians participated in these conferences, such as Ibrahim Atfayish, who attended the Islamic Conference in Jerusalem.
- The influence of the ideas of Prince Shakib Arslan, who called on all Muslims to pay attention to the affairs of the Islamic nation and to defend it²⁹.

B. Personalities Present:

For the first time since the creation of political parties in Algeria, they united around common demands. The conference brought together representatives from almost all political

currents, from right to left, with the exception of the North African Star, based in France³⁰.

Intellectuals, communists, parliamentarians, and religious figures participated. According to historical sources, the idea for this conference originated in Constantine, at the invitation of Abdelhamid Ben Badis, Dr. Benjelloul, and others. They were among the most prominent participants, alongside Bachir El Ibrahimi, Tayeb El Okbi, Dr. Saadan, Ferhat Abbas, Dr. Ben Tahami, and other leading figures from the represented parties³¹.

The conference proceedings were chaired by Dr. Benjelloul, representative of Constantine and prominent member of the Federation of Algerian Muslim Elected Officials. The conference bureau was composed of representatives from Oran, Constantine, and Algiers.

C. Demands of the Conference:

- The conference proceedings took place over one day. The morning session was devoted to opening remarks, while the afternoon session focused on adopting the demands of the Islamic Conference, as approved by the participating parties. Each faction defended its demands; for example, representatives called for the implementation of the Blum Violet Project³², Scholars argued for respect for the Islamic religion and the Arabic language, while communists demanded equal rights with the French. Thus, the conference's demands, in their final version³³, reflected the opinions of all participating political groups and can be summarized as follows:

- Abolition of preferential treatment granted to Algerians.
- Abolition of military courts and amnesty for those convicted during the events in Constantine in 1934.
- Equality between Muslim and French representatives³⁴.
- Recognition of Arabic as an official language on par with French.

- Liberation of Islam from the control of the French state, etc³⁵.

H. Conference Outcomes

At the conclusion of the conference, it was decided to form a delegation to travel to Paris and present the demands to the Popular Front government. The delegation, led by Sheikh Ben Badis and Dr. Benjelloul, arrived in France on July 23, 1936, and met with French Prime Minister Léon Blum, to whom they presented what would become the Charter of Demands of the Algerian Muslim People. The Prime Minister promised to consider these demands³⁶.

Following the return of the delegation from the Islamic Conference of Paris, a public meeting was held on August 2, 1936, at the El Anasser municipal stadium to present the results of their mission to Paris. Messali Hadj, leader of the North African Star, accompanied the delegation. During this meeting, participants heard several speeches, notably those of Abdelhamid Ben Badis and Messali Hadj, which had a profound impact on the audience³⁷. Although the Popular Front did not fulfill its promises, the conference was considered important because it succeeded, for the first time, in unifying the Algerian national movement around common demands. Despite the holding of a second Islamic conference in July 1937, it had no significant impact, merely reiterating the demands of the first³⁸.

4. Manifestations of the political activity of the Association:

* Coordination with national forces: their ideas aligned with those of other movements, such as the North African Star Party, in order to serve the national cause³⁹.

* As early as 1937, Ibn Badis began openly calling for independence, emphasizing that the "liberation of Algeria" was the ultimate goal of the Association's efforts in education and

reform. During World War II, the Association refused to support the French war effort and contributed to the drafting of the "February 1943 Declaration," which called for an end to colonialism⁴⁰, Relations with the National Movement: The association supported the Movement of Friends of the Manifesto and of Liberties in 1944, opposed the colonial constitution of 1947, and demanded the separation of religion and the Algerian state to guarantee the independence of religious institutions⁴¹. During the War of Independence, despite its official dissolution by the colonial authorities in 1956, its students and the generation it trained in its schools formed the core of the mujahideen who launched the revolution of November 1954⁴².

*. The Association of Ulama, through its statutes, pledged to remain neutral in politics. However, as Sheikh al-Ibrahimi pointed out⁴³, scholars are by nature political beings. Nevertheless, the Association engaged politically in its own way: it did not nominate any of its members, and none of them participated in any electoral campaign against political parties. Its influence on the political scene was nonetheless considerable⁴⁴.

*. The Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars (Association des Ulama) entered the political arena at the 1936 Islamic Conference, where Ibn Badis publicly called for independence in 1937. The Association believed that complete Algerian independence was the only way for Algerians to practice their religion. Consequently, it considered French naturalization an act of apostasy when the French administration offered it to Algerians in 1938⁴⁵.

*. The Association of Scholars was not alone in demanding independence, but it was the only one striving to unite Algerians on this issue, bringing together all the national parties, including the People's Party and the Algerian Communist Party. This was indicated in reports from the French administration: the

Association of Scholars, initially a reformist movement focused on religious matters, was now playing a crucial role in fostering closer ties between the national parties, particularly the Algerian Communist Party⁴⁶.

*. The Association of Scholars has not engaged in any political activity, except during the period of national liberation, following the establishment of the "Al-Bayan" laboratory by Dr. Jawad Abdul Latif, Chairman of the Scientific Council. This laboratory documents the Association's activities during the War of Liberation, particularly the accusations of insufficient support for the revolution. I therefore open the doors of this laboratory to members of the Association and anyone wishing to participate, so that everyone can contribute their perspective; we are your guests, and you are our hosts⁴⁷.

*. Ibn Badis was aware of France's military power and its economic and cultural influence, but he believed in its inevitable downfall because France had conquered the territory and subjugated its people, who had endured all of this and always preserved their religion, their language, and their Algerian identity despite policies of ignorance, impoverishment, and Christianization⁴⁸. The patience of the Algerians may one day reach its limit, and they will regain their dignity, obtain their rights, seize their freedom, and restore the sovereignty of their country⁴⁹.

*. Through his writings, Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis contributed to defining the constituent elements of identity and identifying the frameworks within which these elements are articulated to form political, social, and cultural structures where individuals live and flourish, such as the concept of homeland. He presented bold political ideas on homeland and its political and cultural determinants, analyzed the dominant conceptions of patriotism in his time, and outlined methods for

confronting occupying powers based on the conditions conducive to change and the existing context⁵⁰.

*. His opinions did not always coincide with those of the reformers of his time. He sometimes differed from them, particularly on the question of political and national identity, the concept of caliphate and nation, as well as on the means of strengthening the cultural identity of the Algerian people and consolidating the bonds of unity between Algerians⁵¹.

*. Ibn Badis summarized his political thought by saying: "I am a Muslim and a patriot." For him, patriotism implied responsibility and sacrifice, uniting faith and homeland, not homeland alone, thus making association a bastion of national identity⁵².

5. Political and Media Resources:

The Association relied on reformist journalism to raise public awareness of political issues, particularly through newspapers such as *Al-Muntaqid*, *Al-Shihab*, and *Al-Basair*, which served as platforms to denounce colonial policies and mobilize the population. The Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars played a crucial role in awakening consciences among the Algerian people and in supporting the liberation revolution.

The Association worked to preserve Algeria's Arab-Islamic identity and the cultural foundations of the Algerian character by opposing French-led Westernization projects and combating superstitions and heresies that distorted Islam⁵³.

A. Student Missions to Arab Countries:

Among the contributions of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars during this period, one can cite the dispatch of several students from the Ibn Badis Institute to the Zaytuna Mosque in Tunisia, to Al-Azhar University in Egypt, and even to Iraq, Syria, the Hejaz, and Yemen. Despite their small

numbers, these groups were monitored by French intelligence services, both before their departure and upon their return. A report from the North African Coordination Service (SLNA) indicated that "the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars had forged close ties with the Levant, which enabled it to send dozens of students who returned imbued with anti-French ideas."⁵⁴

B. Media:

The newspaper "Al-Basair" is mentioned in some of these reports as having "published 8,000 copies, some of which reached the Middle East and the United States.", The same report also indicates that "Sheikh Al-Ibrahimi specialized in attacks against France and Sufi brotherhoods, while Professor Ahmed Tawfiq Al-Madani was tasked with writing texts on foreign policy through the lens of the Arab League principles."⁵⁵

Conclusion:

*. Anyone studying contemporary Algerian history will find that the Association of Muslim Scholars of Algeria constitutes one of the most important links in its history and has borne fruit in all areas: political, social, religious, educational, and cultural. A national organization and reform movement, it emerged at a time when Algerian society needed to preserve its Arab-Islamic identity in the face of successive attempts by French colonialism to distort it and definitively integrate Algeria into France. Indeed, as has been said, every national organization in Algeria owes it a great deal, whether politically, socially, or economically.

*. The political thinking of the association between 1931 and 1936 aimed to "preserve the Algerian character" in order to prepare the people for the stage of direct political struggle, considering that a nation that does not have its identity cannot achieve its independence.

*. The demands of the Algerian political class were unified for the first time at a historic meeting held in the capital, Paris, in June 1936. This meeting is known as the Islamic Conference of the late 1930s.

*. The Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars constitutes an essential part of contemporary Algerian history. Its political orientations, marked by a strong interest in cultural and religious identity, educational reform, political resistance, and social justice, represent a rich legacy that deserves further exploration.

*. Cooperation between Algerian and international universities and research institutions should be strengthened to study the political orientations of the Association of Muslim Scholars within a broader context. International academic cooperation can offer new perspectives and support comparative studies that foster a better understanding of the Algerian experience of resistance to colonialism

Footnotes:

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⁴ . Abou al-Qasim Saadallah, *alharakat alwataniyat aljazayiriya 1930-1945*, T3, dar algharb al'iislami, bayrut, 1992, P8.

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- ¹⁸ . Courreye , Op.Cit, p 143
- ¹⁹ . El Bachir El-Ibrahimi, euyun... , Op.Cit, p 23.
- ²⁰ . Al-Tabsi, , Op.Cit, p5.
- ²¹ . Al-Ibrahimi, Athar..., Op.Cit, p190.
- ²² . zouzou, Op.Cit, p77.
- ²³ . Courreye , Op.Cit, p 143
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- ⁴⁹ . Al-Ibrahimi, Athar..., Op.Cit, P 182.
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