

## Understanding political Islam in Algeria: experiences, past and present

Sour, Lotfi

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sour, L. (2016). Understanding political Islam in Algeria: experiences, past and present. *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 16(1), 121-137. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-51672-8>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

# Understanding Political Islam in Algeria Experiences, Past and Present

LOTFI SOUR

## INTRODUCTION

As a Muslim-majority country and a regional power with ambitions occupying a highly strategic peculiar position, Algeria is pivotal to U.S and Western security interests in a critical and unstable zone where the North Africa, the African Sahel, and the Middle East intersect. Henceforth, Algeria's importance derives not only from its geopolitical position, and as major producer of oil and gas but also from the example that it provides of its experience in fighting terrorism which has become a model that inspires many the world over.

The first component of the shape of modern Algeria, its ties to Islam, first developed during the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when Arabs conquered Algeria with little resistance from the local population. Then, the various resistance movements against the French Colonization gained justification not only in the name of Algeria but also of Islam, and since independence Islamist movements have made up the major opposition to successive Algerian regimes. Islamism<sup>1</sup> as some would name it, is a very sensitive issue not only on the Algerian or Arabic scene, but at the international level too. Beyond the empirical investigation, political Islam, although a more modern concept, arising out of and from a post-colonial era, treads a different path, as opposed to what most Western political pundits and analysts conventionally think. However, the Islamist movement in Algeria is far from homogenous, pluralistic by nature. Algeria has a wide range of Islamist tendencies, illustrated by Islamist parties' different strategies towards the state, civil society and external partners. The aim of this paper is to deconstruct the political Islam phenomenon dynamics in Algeria, this framework will allow for a better understanding of the current *islamization* process. In addition to that, the paper purpose to comprehend and elucidate the key characteristic features of political Islam movements in Algeria.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "Islamism" or "political Islam" designates a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions and various ramifications, in its contemporary shape, it is an "ideology", a "movement-organization" and a "form of government".

The first part of the article bears an introductory character focusing on historical background of the Islamism in Algeria. The second part explores the history of political Islam in Algerian post colonial context, including critical analysis of National Vision Movements. Following that the latter and larger part of the study examines the dominant role Islamism played in Algerian political life following the regime's decision to allow greater political pluralism from 1989, in particular, the emergence and development period of the main Islamist political party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) which is considered and analyzed along with the dynamics determine its agenda and strategy, also, Eventually, within the scope of this part explores the Islamists descent into increasingly bloody armed struggle with the regime.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAMIC MOVEMENT IN ALGERIA: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In Algeria, Islamism is a phenomenon that was from the beginning influenced by various external intellectual and religious-educational currents. In fact, such influence goes back to World War I (1914-1918) when the youth who refused to be drafted into the French Army emigrated eastwards and attended Tunisian and Middle Eastern universities (al-Zeitouna in Tunisia, al Azhar in Egypt and other religious institutions in the Levant and the Arab Peninsula)<sup>2</sup>. These self-exiled students returned after the Great War influenced by the neo-reformism of Mohammed Abduh and Jamal-Din Al-Afghani. It was these students who established the Association of Algerian Ulama and planted the first seeds of Islamism in Algeria.

Thus, the importance of Islam in the struggle against the French was almost inevitable, it being difficult to conceive of any other framework in which resistance to the Christian invader could be so effectively mobilized. Going back further, Algerian historiography records a genuine nationalist figure around whose image all Algerians could unite. This is Abd al-Qadir, who fought battles across Algeria against French forces seeking to pacify the country. Abd al-Qadir's specific use of the term *Amir* derived from the fuller title *Amir al-Muminin* (Commander of the Believers), was indicative of the Islamic context in which he both clothed and conducted his struggle. He used it in preference to other less religious titles he could have assumed, his use also of the term *jihad* to characterize his campaign against the French was clearly much more than the expedient rallying cry of previous conflicts<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Mustapha Al-Ahnaf et al, *L'Algerie par ses Islamistes*, Karthala, Paris, 1991, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Raphael Danziger, *Abd al-Qadir and the Algerians: Resistance and Internal Consolidation*, Holmes & Meier, New York and London, 1977, pp. 51-63.

The Islam that they expressed and sought to defend in the face of the French imperial onslaught was very much the popular Islam that had come to dominate and characterise Algeria over the centuries. Abd al-Qadir had emerged from the traditional rural strongholds of the sufi brotherhoods and *marabouts* in the west of the country. The *messianism* and *millenialism* of the various mandist revolts reflected the even more mystic trends present in the remote and peripheral mountain and semi-desert area in which they predominantly occurred. However, it was not these traditional elements that became the true forefathers and founders of Algeria's Islamist movement, it was developments in twentieth century Algeria that produced new elements in Algerian Islam that provided the real starting point in the history and development of Algerian Islamism.

Therefore, the Islamic movement reflects not only the social and cultural fabric of society but also the very dynamics that shape change and lead to either stability or instability. The development of this movement is also affected by the socio-economic conditions of the country, the type of political system and its political culture and also the different cultural and intellectual currents that wade through society. However, it was the interaction with the east that created such doctrinal inclinations and this was due two essential causes: the lack of a strong indigenous scholarly tradition in Algeria, and the non-existence of reputable Islamic institutions (like al-Azhar in Egypt or al-Zaitouna in Tunisia, for example). Both reasons have created a vacuum that can only be filled by external inputs<sup>4</sup>.

According to John Entelis, “the growth of Islamic revivalism and reformism in Algeria as part of the broader awakening of Arab-Muslim consciousness that was taking place among the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa during the inter-war period”. The 1920s, the decade which witnessed the first real growth and spread of reformist ideas in Algeria, was also the period which saw the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, religion and politics in Algeria are influenced by the country's ethnic and demographic situation. Unlike the secular Arab nationalism of the Baath, Algerian nationalism was explicitly Muslim. And, unlike the narrowly elitist Free Officers' movement which seized power in Egypt in 1952, the FLN (*National Liberation Front*) emanated from a popular nationalist movement and mobilized nearly all tendencies, including the Islamic one. In Algerian anti-colonialism; the conflict between Nasser's regime and the Muslim

---

<sup>4</sup> Graham E. Fuller, *Algeria the Next Fundamentalist State?*, Arroyo Center & RAND, United States, 1996, pp. 37-38.

<sup>5</sup> John Entelis, *Algeria: The Revolution Institutionalized*, Westview, Boulder, 1986, p. 42.

Brotherhood had no equivalent in Algeria<sup>6</sup>. The Islamic reform movement (*al-Islah*) in late colonial Algeria, although an extension of the Salafiyya movement from which the Muslim Brothers sprang<sup>7</sup>, did not evolve into a rival to the FLN, led from 1931 onwards by Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis's *Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama* (AUMA)<sup>8</sup>.

In its founding articles the Association described itself as “an association for moral education” and gave as one of its primary aims the fight against the “social scourges” of “alcoholism, gambling, idleness, ignorance”. It also declared its intention “to open centers, circles and elementary schools”<sup>9</sup>. The AUMA have traditionally sought educational reforms in an attempt to incorporate Islamic education into the lives of the population<sup>10</sup>. Some reforms have been accomplished at various times in Algeria through the efforts of AUMA, and in the mid-1960s by Malek Bennabi<sup>11</sup>. The reformist movement that achieved eventual institutional expression through the Association of Algerian Ulama was distinct from those of Abd al-Qadir, Bou Ma'za and the various Madhist movements that had risen against the French in the mid nineteenth century. It grounded itself theologically in scripturalist interpretations of Islam, rather than ones based on entrenched local traditions and mysticism and drew its inspiration from foreign thinkers and movements. It also emerged in and appealed to a different section of Algerian society. Reformist Islam's open hostility to the manifestations of these more traditional expressions of Islam further underlined these differences.

The FLN (*National Liberation Front*) established its monopoly of the representation of Algerian Muslims between 1954 and 1962 by co-opting the main pre-existing movements, and it bequeathed a highly developed capacity for co-optation to the independent state<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Tahan, *Harakat Al-Islamiyah Bain al-Fitna wal Jihad*, transl. as *Islamic Movements between Division and Jihad*, Dar Marefah Press, Lebanon, 2007, pp. 265-268.

<sup>7</sup> International crisis group, *Islamism, Violence and Reform in Algeria: Turning the Page*, ICG Middle East Report, No. 29, Cairo/Brussels, 30 July 2004, in [https://www.google.dz/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwj5eSJ\\_4jKAhUFzXQKHURIBJ](https://www.google.dz/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwj5eSJ_4jKAhUFzXQKHURIBJ), accessed on November 15, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Ali Merad, *Le Reformisme Musulman en Algerie de 1925 a 1940*, Moulton & Co., Paris, 1967, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> Claude Collot, Jean-Robert Henry, *Le Mouvement National Algerien: Textes 1912-1954*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1978, pp. 44-47.

<sup>10</sup> Michael WILLIS, *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria*, Lebanon, NY: Ithaca, 1996, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 11-13.

<sup>12</sup> In 1955-1956, the FLN performed the *tour de force* of coopting not only the AUMA but also Ferhat Abbas's *Democratic Union of the Algerian Manifesto* (representing the Westernised middle classes) and the Algerian Communist Party. The only element it did not co-opt were the die-hard supporters of Messali Hadj, whose rival Algerian National Movement it eliminated physically. Co-optation has been a prominent tactic of the post-colonial state and a central aspect of its response to the Islamist movement since 1989.

Organizationally, the AUMA provided significant support to the FLN's cause. The continued expansion of the Association's education network – the number of schools it administered doubling from 90 in 1947 to 181 by 1954, with its *madrases* (schools) alone providing an education for 40.000 pupils – provided important logistical bases for the rebels<sup>13</sup>. Together with the reformist-run mosques they also provided useful collection points for funds and centers for the spread of information and the nationalist message. Sermons during the month of Ramadan, in 1956 in particular, helped to stoke patriotic fervour and popular support for the struggle. The eventual victory in 1962 of the Algerian nationalists in their war against the French colonial state and the final achievement of full political independence clearly opened a whole new chapter in both Algerian history and the role of Islam and Islamism in it. However, it also closed a chapter: that of the role of Islam in the colonial period.

## THE RISE OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN POST-INDEPENDENCE ALGERIA

The final achievement of independence in June 1962 shifted the whole focus of Algerian activity and attention away from the all-consuming struggle against the French and towards the construction and consolidation of their new state. Though, fracturing inevitably occurred in the institutional front and hegemony that the FLN had been able to forge during the nearly eight years of the war of liberation as different ideological, regional, personal and factional interests engaged in a struggle for pre-eminence. However, whilst liberals, Marxists, internal and external army commanders, the *wilaya* commanders, the imprisoned leaders and Berber-based factions entered the political and occasionally armed competition for influence, an independent and identifiable lobby arguing for a specifically Islamically-based Algeria was notably absent. The Islamic current, so robustly represented by the Association of Algerian Ulama in the two decades preceding the war of liberation, had been sidelined during the struggle, its absorption by the FLN, in contrast to other groupings that joined the front, having deprived it of its independent voice and agenda<sup>14</sup>.

However, in the post-independence period, the heady policies of socialism and Third Worldism pursued by the FLN, elicited Islamist resistance and at times organized opposition. The most significant group to emerge in the 1960s was Al Qiyam (values), which called for Algeria's cultural rehabilitation

---

<sup>13</sup> Charles-Robert Ageron, *Histoire de L'Algérie contemporaine*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1979, p. 582.

<sup>14</sup> David Ottaway, Marina Ottaway, *Algeria: The Politics of a Socialist Revolution*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1970, p. 47.

to complement its national autonomy. Under the leadership of Hashemi Tidjani, Ben Badis's successor, this group successfully lobbied Ahmed Ben Bella to mandate Islamic religious education in public schools. Through its social networks and journal, *Maggallot al-tadhib al-Islamiyya*, the association stood firm against a rising tide of secularism. The essential blueprint of Islamic politics emerged at this point, as insistence on cultural integrity often led to political expressions inconsistent with the demands of the state<sup>15</sup>. This process culminated in the unveiling of “A Charter for an Islamic State” at Algiers University on November 12, 1982. Demonstrations on university campuses led to clashes with police and a number of arrests in the weeks that followed. Throughout the period 1979-1982 the Chadli regime had practised a fairly tolerant approach to the clearly growing Islamist tendency. The reasons for such an approach were probably linked to the presence of Islamist sympathies amongst some of the senior personnel in the government but more likely were the result of wider policy considerations and needs on the part of the regime<sup>16</sup>.

### **ISLAMISM IN MODERN ALGERIA: POLITICAL ISLAM AS AN AGENDA**

In the context of an assessment of the ability to integrate, the Islamic movements in the political process and encourage them to embrace moderation in order to allow them play a role in the process of democratization, Algeria witnessed the emergence of three key Islamic movements that compete for prominence among the masses: the movement of the “Algerian Muslim Brotherhood” the so called association “Movement Djaz'ara” or “cultural building movement” and the “Salafi movement” The first was launched after the Egyptian experience and the transfer of political thought of the Muslim Brotherhood from Egypt to Algeria<sup>17</sup>. The second came from the experience and the role of the historic Association of Muslim Scholars in the Algerian revolution and after independence transformed to a so called “Djaz'ara” movement which stemmed from the university students, influenced by the Islamic thinker, “Malik Ibn Naby”. The third the “Salafi Movement” was inspired by the mass of the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia<sup>18</sup>.

We can deconstruct external influence on Algerian Islamism by classifying this

---

<sup>15</sup> Michael Willis, *The Islamists Challenge in Algeria: A Political History*, New York, 1996, pp. 1-69.

<sup>16</sup> Hugh Roberts, “Radical Islamism and the Dilemma of Algerian Nationalism: The Embattled Arians of Algiers”, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 2, April 1988, p. 577.

<sup>17</sup> Amel Boubekeur, “Political Islam in Algeria”, *CEPS Working Document*, No. 268, May 2007, pp. 4-6.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem*, “Salafism and Radical Politics in Post conflict Algeria”, *Carnegie Papers*, Carnegie Middle East Center, Number 11, September 2008, pp. 4-5.

influence into three typologies. The first category is intellectual in essence. Several Algerian Islamists have been influenced by the thinking of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and Syria. This is particularly true for some Algerian students who studied in both states, or those taught by Egyptian or Syrian teachers working in Algeria up to the late 1980s. An analysis of three Islamist parties belonging to this intellectual and political breed in Algeria (HMS, An\_nahda and al-Islah) reveals the extent of this influence<sup>19</sup>, as do the organic links that tie the HMS party to the International Movement of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The second category could be termed “spiritual influence”. A large fraction of the Algerian youth has been deeply influenced by the Salafi doctrine. This influence was also noticeable in the eighties when the Chadli regime lifted age restrictions on people going for Umrah or Hajj. Quite a number of pilgrims (and many students studying in the Arabian Peninsula) returned to Algeria enriched by this spiritual experience and deeply touched by the intensity of religious discourse in the Holy land of Islam<sup>20</sup>. They came back spreading their newly acquired doctrinal convictions and ideas. They further strengthened Salafi presence in Algeria. Ali Belhadj is perceived in Algeria as one of the prominent figures of this Salafist movement and the late Jordanian scholar al\_Al bani as its spiritual guide<sup>21</sup>.

The final category could be termed methodical influence. More than 1400 Algerians served in the Afghan war<sup>22</sup> and returned back indoctrinated with the kind of thinking that led them to refuse anything but their own concept of the Khilafat and Islamic state. They perceived the existing political system as a legitimate target for their conception of Jihad. These Afghan veterans constituted the hard core of terrorist groups in the country which subscribe to an internationalist agenda (from the GSPC to the AQMI). In fact, a careful and comparative reading of the discourses and methodologies adopted by these groups with book written by one of the leaders of the International Jihadi Movement Omar Abdelhakim alias Abu Mussab<sup>23</sup> demonstrates the striking resemblance between them<sup>24</sup>.

Nevertheless, by using a historical perspective, Islamist groups fall into three broad categories, which are listed below, depending on the strategy for *islamization* adopted by each category:

1. *Religious-political movements*: These are composed of Islamic Welfare and religious groups, associations and individuals that reject the state's monopoly

<sup>19</sup> Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield: Algeria 1988–2002*, Verso, London, 2003, p. 65.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Evans, John Phillips, *Algeria. Anger of the Dispossessed*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2007, pp. 144-145.

<sup>21</sup> Amel Boubekeur, “Salafism and Radical Politics...cit.”, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of Al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists*, Saqi, London, 2010, p. 70.

<sup>23</sup> Abu Musab al-Suri's, *A Summary of My Testimony on the Holy Struggle in Algeria, 1988-1996*. Al-Suri is considered to be the Clausewitz of al-Qaida, despite his capture in 2005.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 86-73.



on Islamic discourse and strive to recapture the initiative in this area from the authorities by promoting charitable, cultural, educational and social activities. This is how all the politically-oriented Islamic movements started in the sixties and the seventies. The associations, groups and individuals that belong to this category want to re-islamize society through education, welfare and the spread of the moral code. In the case of Algeria, one can mention the association of al-Qiyam (values) in the sixties or al-Irshad wal islah (an association belonging to the HMS party) and the former Islamic League (al-rabita al-Islamiya) presided over by the late Sheikh Sahnoun, which served as an umbrella organization for all the currents of the Islamic movement between 1988 and 1991<sup>25</sup>.

2. *Politico-Religious movements*: This category is composed mainly of political parties (HMS, Nahda, al-Islah) that base their strategy on political participation in national politics through socialization, mobilization of the masses and by taking part in electoral contests. These parties and organizations subscribe to Algerian constitutional and organic rules of engagement listed in the 1996 Constitution and the 1997 Law on Political Parties. Moreover, the HMS has been in government for over 8 years as part of a broad political alliance<sup>26</sup>.

3. *Radical Islamist Movements*: This category is composed of a nebula of militant and hardline groups seeking the immediate transformation of both state and society through a terrorist *modus operandi*. These include the Armed Islamic Movement or MIA, the Armed Islamic Groups or GIA, the Islamic Salvation Army or AIS which was the armed wing of the disbanded FIS, the GSPC and of late al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb which subscribes to the global terrorist network's agenda and ideas<sup>27</sup>.

Table 1

Typology of Islamist Movements in Algeria

| STRATEGY | Non Violent          |                     | Violent                 |
|----------|----------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| CATEGORY | Apolitical Islamists | Political Islamists | Revolutionary Islamists |
| AUDIENCE | National             | National            | Transnational           |

The year 1988 proved to be a watershed in Algeria's modern history. Declining oil prices and the emergence of a global surge toward free markets led the regime to launch liberalization and deregulation program that entailed

<sup>25</sup> Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War, 1990–1998*, Hurst & Co., London, 1998, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield...* cit., p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Evans, John Phillips, *Algeria...* cit., pp. 120-121.

the elimination of many social-welfare services and subsidies<sup>28</sup>. The removal of state controls at a time of financial shortfall disproportionately affected the urban working class and the poor. The socially disruptive ramifications of this policy were exacerbated by high inflation and the emergence of an underground economy. The gap between rich and poor continued to grow while official corruption, an endemic feature of Algerian bureaucracy, reached alarming rates. The much-eroded social compact between the revolutionary regime and the populace ruptured with the October 1988 riots throughout Algeria's urban centers. The brutal suppression of the marches by the military further undermined the legitimacy of a regime that based its power on its historical role as a force for liberation. In the aftermath of the riots, that pillar finally began to crumble<sup>29</sup>. The Chadli regime's response to the enveloping economic and political crisis was the introduction of sweeping political liberalization. Given the failure of its economic policies, the regime perceived that electoral triumphs would resurrect its sagging fortunes and once more buff up its tarnished image. The aging military men still immured in their revolutionary vision where the army was the great liberator and therefore the legitimate repository of power, failed to note the arrival of a new generation focused on practical achievements. As discussed above, the political liberalization measures came at a time when mass discontent with the ruling elite reached a fever pitch and was awaiting an avenue for its expression<sup>30</sup>. Despite the looming problems, the liberalization policy initially appeared to yield considerable advantage. For the first time in its history, Algeria witnessed a relatively free political atmosphere with a flourishing press, competitive political parties and intense debate on the direction of the state. Hovering over this renaissance was the ominous shadow of persistent economic decline and a restive military hierarchy uneasy about departures from the status quo. Algeria's liberal interregnum was bound to be short-lived, as the forces of radicalism would soon be plotting to reclaim the political landscape<sup>31</sup>.

---

<sup>28</sup> Hugh Roberts, "Algeria's National Protesta", Foreign policy, January 10, 2011, in <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/10/algerias-national-protesta>, accessed 18 December 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Lynette Rummel, "Privatization and Democratization in Algeria, State and Society in Algeria", in John Entelis, Philip Naylor, *State and Society in Algeria*, Westview, Boulder, CO., 1995, pp. 50-63.

<sup>30</sup> Lahoari Addi, *L'Algérie et la démocratie: Pouvoir et crise politique dans l'Algérie contemporaine*, Paris, 1994; and Algeria's Army, Algeria's Agony, *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 1998, in <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/algeria/1998-07-01/algerias-army-algerias-agony>, accessed 11 March 2015.

<sup>31</sup> William Quandt, *Between Ballots and Bullets: Algeria's Transition from Authoritarianism*, Brookings, Washington DC., 1998, pp. 42-62.

### *The Birth of The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS)*

The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was founded in March 1989 and legalized as a political party the following September. It quickly gained support, especially among the urban poor and urban youth, and on 12 June 1990 it won a sweeping victory in elections for the communal and regional assemblies – the first pluralist elections in independent Algeria<sup>32</sup>. The FIS employed a broad variety of techniques to strengthen its movement, building toward its parliamentary election plurality (subsequently annulled) in 1991. These techniques include education, the use of money, propagation of a clear-cut message, modern media techniques, electioneering, use of municipal power bases and the ability to dispense largesse, and broad networks of sympathizers that reach into the ruling FLN itself. In most senses, these techniques are thoroughly modern, typical of successful emerging political parties in developing countries. Social mobilization, rather than underground organization, has characterized most of the FIS success at least until the harsh state crackdown that has pushed the party into more clandestine forms of organization and activity<sup>33</sup>. Despite a crackdown in June-July 1991, in which its leaders, Abassi Madani<sup>34</sup> and Ali Ben Hadj<sup>35</sup>, and many other activists were arrested, the party gained a spectacular lead in the first round of the legislative elections held on 26 December 1991, which placed it on course for a massive majority in the National Assembly if the second round went ahead on 16 January 1992<sup>36</sup>. Instead, on 11 January 1992, the army commanders forced President Chadli to resign and cancelled the elections<sup>37</sup>. In the following days, they invented a so called High State Committee to serve as a collective presidency for the rest of Chadli's term and enforced a previously neglected law

---

<sup>32</sup> The FIS polled 4.2 million votes (54 per cent of the total) and won control of 854 of Algeria's 1.581 communal assemblies and 31 of the 48 *wilaya* (regional) assemblies.

<sup>33</sup> Graham E. Fuller, *Algeria...cit.*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>34</sup> Born in 1931, Abassi took part in the FLN's uprising on 1 November 1954; after 1962 he was an FLN militant until the late 1970s and emerged as a leader of the Islamist movement in the early 1980s. In Hmida Laayachi's view, "Abassi Madani was more a product of the FLN than an Islamist". ICG interview, 20 August 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Born in Tunisia into a family of war refugees, Ben Hadj emerged during the 1988 riots as the leading Islamist in the Bab El Oued district of Algiers.

<sup>36</sup> The FIS polled 3.26 million votes (1 million less than in 1990), only 24.59 per cent of the electorate. On a low turnout this amounted to 47.27 per cent of the total vote and enabled the FIS to win 188 seats outright and its candidates to gain the lead in 143 of the 198 undecided seats. Hocine Ait Ahmed's FFS won 25 seats, mainly in Kabylia, the FLN a mere sixteen nationwide and Independents three. These results pointed to the FIS ultimately gaining around 75 per cent of the seats in the new assembly.

<sup>37</sup> James D. Le Sueur, *Algeria since 1989: Between Terror and Democracy*, Zed Books, New York and London, 2010, pp. 50-54.

banning the use of mosques by political parties, thereby provoking violent clashes with FIS activists across the country<sup>38</sup>.

These disorders were then invoked to justify the decisions announced on 9 February 1992 to introduce a state of emergency and ban the FIS, both of which remain in force<sup>39</sup>. The events of January to March 1992 finally brought to a close Algerian Islamism's brief three-year foray into the arena of party political competition for political power. The cancellation and annulment of the elections by the "new" regime formally signaled an end to Algeria's wider and similarly short-lived experiment with democratization and political pluralism. As Luis Martinez indicated, the dramatic political transformation that occurred at the heart of the Algerian political system at the start of 1992 ensured that revolutionary politics became routine politics for most of the players involved in this struggle for state power<sup>40</sup>. The period 1992 to 1994 witnessed the Islamist movement entering what could be described as its "post-constitutionalist" period. This transition was not chosen of its own volition, however much some Islamists may have welcomed it, but was rather imposed on it by the regime through the cancellation of the elections and the dissolution of the FIS.

The effective exclusion of the FIS from Algeria's constitutional and electoral processes, with explicit assurances from the regime that it, or any similar successor party, would not be permitted to rejoin these processes at some future stage, vindicated those elements in the Islamist movement who had either explicitly rejected or otherwise tactically gone along with the electoral strategy of the FIS. The cancellation of the elections and the dissolution of the FIS were signals to these elements that the movement should resort to the more fitting means of acquiring power through armed struggle<sup>41</sup>.

As discussed above, after the FIS was banned, the jihadist Salafism got involved in a dark tunnel of violence against the regime. According to scientific Salafists, Salafist militants had gone astray when they decided to confront the regime and used violence against innocent civilians. They believe that the Jihadist Salafist groups lost their pretext to fight against the regime which called for truce with other Islamic movements<sup>42</sup>.

---

<sup>38</sup> Ghania Mouffok, "Le FLN entre pouvoir et opposition", in Reporters Sans Frontières, *Le Drame Algérien*, Édition La Découverte, Paris, 1995, pp. 147-149.

<sup>39</sup> Madjid Benchikh, *Algérie: Un pouvoir politique militarisé*, Ed. L'Harmattan, Paris, 2003, p. 119.

<sup>40</sup> Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War 1990-1998*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000.

<sup>41</sup> Aissa Khelladi, *Algérie: Les Islamistes Face au Pouvoir*, Editions Alfa, Algiers, 1992, p. 152.

<sup>42</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", retrieved from CÉRIUM website, [www.cerium.ca/.../pdf/WIKTOROWICZ\\_2006\\_Anat](http://www.cerium.ca/.../pdf/WIKTOROWICZ_2006_Anat), accessed on September 7, 2014.

In 1997, the armed organization of the FIS unilaterally declared a cease-fire; in 1999, after negotiations with Abdelqader Hachani, considered to be the “number three” man within the FIS, the groundwork was laid for Bouteflika’s “civil reconciliation” program, the centerpiece of which was a general amnesty for members of the FIS and its armed wing, the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS). Bouteflika hoped that this would enable the government to concentrate on combating the GIA and another radical militant organization, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). However, the more militant Islamists have refused to abandon the armed struggle, and Hachani himself was assassinated in November 1999. Bouteflika has vowed to exterminate armed radicals who did not surrender to the state under the terms of the amnesty the GIA and the GSPC are estimated to number between 5.000 and 7.000 militants<sup>43</sup>. Nevertheless, while violence still continues in Algeria, the government has had greater success since 1999 in containing and localizing the bloodshed.

The FIS had an armed military faction – the Islamic Armed Group (GIA), but after several years of civil war most elements of the GIA reconciled. The irreconcilables among the GIA formed the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). This group would last from 2002 to 2007, and although still in existence, most of the GSPC would reconcile with the government and those refusing to compromise formed the bulk of what is Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The FIS today has evolved into an open but illegal political party that has joined in opposition to the current government of Algeria<sup>44</sup>.

### *The Descent into Conflict: The Evolution of Militant Islam in Algeria*

Radical Islam is not a novelty in Algeria. The first instance of armed insurgency was undertaken by the Armed Islamic Movement (MIA). Radical groups emerged in 1993 that challenged the idea, taken up by the MIA and the AIS, of returning to the political process and, to that end, of focusing on targeting the government. Established in 1991, the Movement for the Islamic State (MEI) focused on taking the battle to the people of Algeria<sup>45</sup>. This group constituted the precursor of Islamic radicalism in Algeria. The AIS is the official military wing of the FIS. This group has gained notoriety as the best equipped armed Islamic group. The AIS was created in 1994 by internal and clandestine

---

<sup>43</sup> Rachid Tlemcani, “Algeria Under Bouteflika: Civil Strife and National Reconciliation”, *Carnegie Papers*, Carnegie Middle East Center, Number 7, February 2008, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Hugh Roberts, “Demilitarising Algeria”, *Carnegie Papers*, Carnegie Middle East Center, Number 86, May 2007, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

leadership of the FIS when they realized that the movement was likely to be carried along by the GIA extremists in a “fight to the death”. The AIS attempted to distance itself from the GIA by condemning the latter’s terrorist acts, although it did not renounce armed conflict. The AIS has however primarily targeted the security forces and Special Forces<sup>46</sup>.

The GIA was created in 1993 as a result of the oppression orchestrated by the regime, which radicalized the extreme fringes of the Islamic movement, which thereafter became disillusioned with any political discourse<sup>47</sup>. The GIA’s strategy in the war is understood as one of “total war”, the destruction of the ruling regime by eliminating all bases of social support for it. In contrast to the MIA and AIS, the GIA was active for the most part in urban settings, whereas the MIA and the AIS were firmly established in and conducted operations from mountainous areas. From 1998 on, the GIA and a splinter group from it, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), as well as other groups related to the GSPC have been active<sup>48</sup>.

The FIS established a dual strategy combining conciliation and aggressiveness. It attacked the state bureaucracy-its corruption and nepotism and the spread of un-Islamic practices, and focused on social welfare through acts of national solidarity and large political demonstrations to force the regime to consider some Islamic perceptions on matters of national concern<sup>49</sup>. In addition, the FIS reverted to armed violence in January 1992 in response to the army’s coup, its annulment of the FIS national election victory, its rejection of FIS activists who sought peaceful means to power, the subsequent arrest of hundreds of FIS leaders including its top leadership, and the outright banning of the party<sup>50</sup>. These events changed the character of the Algerian political struggle. What had been emerging as an uncomfortable accommodation between a reformist presidency and the FIS had been transformed into a zero-sum game that has brought the country into a state of massive violence and guerilla war<sup>51</sup>. In order to avoid the “Illumination of Algerian politics” by the FIS after its victory in the general elections, and in order to secure their own interests and that of the *nomenklatura*, the army cancelled these elections and adopted a multidimensional strategy for the uprooting of the FIS as a political and social force. The strategy was not considered as one of containment, but final eradication of the FIS<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> Mohamed Gharib, *The Algerian Islamist Movement, Algeria: Revolution Revisited*, Islamic World Report, 1997, p. 79.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

<sup>48</sup> Luis Martinez, “Why the Violence in Algeria”, *Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2004, pp. 14-27.

<sup>49</sup> Mohamed Gharib, *The Algerian Islamist Movement...cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39.

<sup>51</sup> Osman Bencherif, “Algeria Faces the Rough Beast”, *Middle East Quarterly*, vol.2, no. 4, December 1995, pp. 31-38.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 92.

Meanwhile, the wider Islamist movement in Algeria became more moderate, accepting the electoral process and even allowing women's participation in it as well as in the economy at large<sup>53</sup>. Unlike the FIS, those Algerian Islamist parties with participationist strategies toward the state, like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas (Movement of Society for Peace), and Islah (National Reform Movement) have been allowed to compete politically, and since 1997, Hamas has even been part of the Presidential Alliance, comprising the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the National Democratic Rally (RND).

On the other hand, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika offered an amnesty to Islamist rebels in September 1999. Most groups accepted, and by the January 2000 deadline some 5.000 AIS militants had surrendered their weapons<sup>54</sup>. But the GSPC refused amnesty. By 2002 the GSPC claimed to have over 4.000 fighters and was concentrating its attacks on Algerian military convoys and bases. In September 2002 Bouteflika ordered a crackdown on the GSPC, Algeria's largest anti-Islamist operation in five years<sup>55</sup>. The Group responded with stepped-up raids, including an attack led by Saïfi on a convoy near Batna in January 2003 that killed forty-three soldiers<sup>56</sup>. Despite the GSPC's new global rhetoric, Hattab remained committed to national jihad, but his leadership was challenged by rival *amirs* who had a more internationalist outlook, including Nabil Sahraoui, Abdelmalek Droukdel (a.k.a. Abu Musab Abdelwadoud), and Saïfi. Saïfi's kidnapping of thirty-two European tourists in the Tassili Massif was a challenge to Hattab<sup>57</sup>.

### *Algerian Islamism in Crossroad: From Domestic "Jihad" Toward Transnational Terror*

Basically, there had always been a certain degree of tension between national jihad and global jihad in the Algerian Islamist movement. The "Afghans" were inspired by global jihad because of their

---

<sup>53</sup> International Crisis Group, "Islamism, Violence and Reform in Algeria: Turning the Page, Islamism in North Africa III", *Middle East Report*, no. 29, July 30, 2004.

<sup>54</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, "Algeria's GSPC and America's War on Terror", *Policy Watch*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 15, 2002, in <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=1544>, accessed March 13, 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Raffi Katchadourian, "Pursuing Terrorists in the Great Desert: The U.S. Military's \$500 Million Gamble to Prevent the Next Afghanistan", *The Village Voice*, January 31, 2006, in <http://www.villagevoice.com/2006-01-17/news/pursuing-terrorists-in-the-great-desert/>, accessed March 13, 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 63, no. 2, 2009, pp. 213-226.

experience in Pakistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But the GIA's self-proclaimed goal had always been "jihad in Algeria". Jean-Pierre Filiu addresses this issue, saying "the national framework of the armed struggle was explicit"<sup>58</sup>. This same tension between national vs. global jihad continued under the GSPC/AQIM. Hassan Hattab, for example, was an Algerianist, focused on national jihad. With the death of Antar Zouabri at the hands of security forces in February 2002, the GIA falling apart, and the AIS long gone, Hattab preferred to retrench and concentrate on the GSPC's Kabilia strongholds in the mountains east of Algiers. However, Hattab's Algerian strategy was challenged by other *amirs* with a more global outlook, including Sahraoui, Droukdel (a.k.a. Abu Musab Abdelwadoud), and Saïfi (a.k.a. Abdelrezak El-Para). Saïfi's kidnapping of the thirty-two hostages in early 2003 can be seen, therefore, as a direct challenge to Hattab's national jihad approach<sup>59</sup>. Hattab was deposed in 2003 by the internationalists in favor of the more globally oriented Sahraoui<sup>60</sup>.

Actually, attacks on foreign targets, including attacks on foreign installations beyond Algeria's borders and on foreign interests within Algeria, were also manifestations of the GSPC's global jihad. One of the first such attacks was the raid on the Lemghiti army barracks in Mauritania in June 2005<sup>61</sup>.

By the time that GSPC officially became AQIM, global jihad in Algeria had failed. Inroads into the Sahara had been significant, and had raised alarm among US policy makers, but they appeared to have more to do with kidnappings for ransom and contraband trafficking than with global jihad. Initiatives undertaken by the internationalist wing of GSPC/AQIM did not succeed in integrating the Algerian Islamist movement into the global jihad. Nor did they succeed in slowing the prevailing trend among Algerian Muslims away from armed jihad altogether, a trend that had manifested itself in a series of publicly supported amnesties and the surrender of thousands of fighters. In effect, global jihad in Algeria meant local suicide bombings backed by internationalist rhetoric. Despite such rhetoric the Group remained focused on its strongholds in Kabylia and on its Saharan support groups<sup>62</sup>.

Nonetheless, the attempt by the GSPC/AQIM to turn global and embrace the campaign against the Far Enemy, especially the thrust into the Sahelian countries, did succeed in one respect: it got the attention of American Global War on Terror (GWOT) warriors and led to a massive securitization program in the region.

---

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 218.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 217-220.

<sup>60</sup> Darling Dan, "Social Analysis: Al-Qaeda's African Arm", *Winds of Change.net*, April 1, 2004: <http://www.windsofchange.net/archives/004795.htm>, accessed November 25, 2010.

<sup>61</sup> Stephen Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group into an Al-Qa'ida Affiliate and its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region", *Concerned African Scholars*, Bulletin no. 85, Spring 2010, p. 17.

<sup>62</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad...cit.", pp. 225-226.



Needless to say, since 9/11, the United States has considered Algeria an important partner in this fight against terrorism. The new presence of AQIM at an international level is the direct result granted credibility to Algeria's plight and strife. The West became very much interested in Algeria as an expert that was acquired against a transnational movement that needs to be dealt through a concerted international process and on the basis of a consensual legal definition of terrorism given by an international legal instrument that is clear and devoid of any religious or cultural stereotypes.

The January 2013 attack on the In-Aménas gas facility in eastern Algeria demonstrated the ongoing threat to such interests from radical groups<sup>63</sup>. However, the Algerian approach focus on the increased regional cooperation which is considered to be vital in combating Islamist groups and criminal gangs operating in Algeria and in the wider region. For many years, Algeria push for regional cooperation and discreet aid from the West is crucial to help the Sahel countries regain control of their territory from al-Qaeda forces and prevent the terror group from taking hold in Africa<sup>64</sup>.

It is by all accounts remarkable that over the next decade, Algeria's political Islam movement could evolve in a number of different ways. So, the future of Islamism in Algeria is not certain at all; especially after the Arab Spring which has offered local terrorist groups (radical Islamism) the opportunity of gaining ideological influence and material strength and it has allowed al-Qaeda to consider repositioning itself on the African continent.

## CONCLUSION

This paper offers a proper understanding of the far reaching and complex dynamics of change within Islamism. The historical evolution of Islamism in Algeria reveals its inability to think of itself as existing in a pluralistic system, which it denies through the idea of the Islamic state, the use of violence, or the rejection of politics. However, Algerian political Islam movements also reveal the need for the international community to rethink the place of radical Islamist movements.

It was argued in the paper that in the Algerian case, shifting patterns of state engagement and repression facilitated a change in the Islamist movement from non-violent to violent Islamist strategies. Regardless of the fact that tactically, violent Islamist groups suggests a greater need to pursue policies that address reasons for a group's choice of violent strategies rather than the pursuit

---

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>64</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?", *Carnegie Papers*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA, Washington DC , No. 112, June 2010, p. 1.

of military-focused policies alone, which often fail to reduce Islamist violence. The sudden end to the political opening immediately resulted in clashes between Islamists and the security forces. Additionally, the nature of Islamic movement and the types of conflicts that have occurred over the last three decades has changed significantly. However, to many international observers, it is the political participation of hard-line Islamists like the FIS, and their rejection of a democratic and secular state, that led Algeria to the violence of recent decades, the change in the attitude of political Islam movement towards the Algerian regime was dramatic. A shifting relationship between an Islamist movement and the state can trigger a violent strategy. Finally, Islamist groups are not incorporated into domestic political processes but instead are forcibly repressed by the state; they may become transnational organizations, which are extremely difficult to control, because transnational groups do not respond well to domestic policies, they are less likely to change in response to political incentives. This has been the case with Algerian Islamists movements; however de-radicalization process and efforts to counter radicalization and violent extremism that lead to terrorism must also have global application.