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## Reflections on Algeria's Islamist Experiences, Past and Present

by CDR Youssef Aboul-Enein, MSC, USN

The revolutionary history of Algeria is inextricably linked to Islamist symbols and activism. It is important to comprehend that Islam tends to be exploited by Near East revolutionary movements as a means of exerting societal control. Upon its independence from France in August 1962, Algeria's religious clergy, who were long-suppressed by French colonial authorities, called for a rejection of secularism as practiced by the ideals of the French Revolution. The ideals of the French Revolution in its pure form, is a rigid secularism that has no place for God in government life. This form of French ultra-secularism, known as *laïcité* (laicism), rejects the mention of God in currency, and the invocation of God before and after public speeches. It is a battle being fought in France today pitting the rights of an individual to dress as they please, against attempts to pass legislation on the dress of practicing Muslim citizens. Of course, secularism is not monolithic, thus the attempt to apply laicism in the Muslim world has been met with natural aversion, and Islamist movements reacted strongly to such uncompromising interpretations of secularism.

From an American perspective, it is highly likely that banning God entirely from government would be met with hostility in the United States. The French revolutionary ideals even concerned America's Founding Fathers such as George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, who saw the imposition of French ultra-secularism in the United States with concern. The radical revolutionary French factions (the Jacobins) dreamed of an empire of liberty that would bind France and the United States in combating monarchism and clericalism around the globe. The point is that the French vision of secularism was not acceptable to America's founders, so one can only imagine the Algerian view of French secularism when the region was colonized in 1832.

### *Alienation and Algerian War of Independence*

During the Algerian War for Independence (1954-1962), the National Liberation Front (FLN) used Islamic morals enforcement to gain control of the margins of Algerian society, starting with the criminal class. They used the cloak of religious morality as a means of societal control, and the criminal classes were vulnerable to exploitation from French colonial law enforcement, Algerian organized crime syndicates, and Islamist street enforcers. Islamic morals were used to undertake a block by block control of the *Kasbah* (Algerian neighborhoods). The FLN offered the marginalized and criminal under-classes a chance to clean up the neighborhood and join the FLN or be seen as collaborators. In Algeria, religiosity was utilized as a pretext for social control. After independence from France Islam was used as a means of distinguishing among FLN leaders, there were those who were conservative Islamist, pan-Arab Islamist, or Arab Socialist.

FLN leaders Mohammed Boudiaf, Ahmed Ben Bella, and Houari Boumediene, in an effort to demonstrate their commitment to being as anti-French soon after independence, interjected an Islamist curriculum in schools and wrote Algeria's first post-independence citizenship codes with an Islamic clause. These actions were not just to bolster revolutionary credentials, but a reaction to repressive French codes that compelled former Algerian subjects to abandon their religion, language, and heritage to assimilate into French society. Even if the Algerian assimilated, he was viewed by Frenchmen in Algeria as a "dirty fellagha," a French arabized term for bandit and a racial epithet. Although the racial epithets have changed, 21<sup>st</sup> century France still suffers from perceptions of racism and lack of equal opportunity among its North African immigrants.

### ***Islamist Expressions infuses itself into Algeria's anti-French Revolutionary Period***

As discussed there were always cadres within Algeria's independence movement, even within the National Liberation Front (FLN) who held an Islamist vision for Algeria. The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) had its origins in the Islamist wing of the anti-colonial movement of the 1960s, and envisioned itself as the natural progression from French independence to establishing a civil society based upon the principle of God's rule and popular will. This betrays the influence of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) who argued that all sovereignty belonged to God, a concept influenced by the Pakistani Islamist theorist Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi (1903-1979). Why do these strands of ideology matter? Simply through the rhetoric of the FIS, one can trace the influence non-Algerian ideas have had on the movement and their origins. Qutb in particular used the concept of God's total sovereignty to de-legitimize all institutions of democracy. The FIS's ideology was not scrutinized by the electorate, and their frustration with decades of FLN rule netted a vote of 853 municipal seats out of 1,539, as well as 32 out of 48 districts in 1990.

The Salafist platform, one that believes in returning to an Islam practiced by the pious founders, that the FIS espoused called for Islam as the only salvation for Algeria's socio-economic problems. The FIS saw in the French not only physical colonization, but the colonization of the mind and culture of Algeria. The FIS viewed itself as the vanguard in the preservation of Algeria's Islamic character after 132 years of French colonization. FIS stood for the religious, political, and social reform of religious life in Algeria. What the FIS never says explicitly is this religious reform is on their own terms, and in their own image. It is a reform influenced by a militant cadre energized by the Soviet-Afghan War, as well as wars in Bosnia, and Chechnya. Before the arrival of the FIS, Algeria's Islamist scene was dominated by student groups in university campuses. They were contained within those campuses, but like many other universities in the Arab world Islamist student groups would be radicalized by the Soviet-Afghan War, and returning Arab-Afghan veterans.

### ***Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) Political Philosophy***

In 1982 an *Ulema* (Clerical) Conference signed a manifesto calling on the government to apply Islamic law, remove female judges, establish an Islamic economic system, segregate the sexes, prevent vice, enforce morals, and release political prisoners. Perhaps their final demand, the punishment of those deemed enemies of the faith serving in the state, was the most controversial and intolerable from the view of the ruling FLN party.

Sheikh Ahmed Sahnoun, a disciple of Imam Ahmed Ben Badis (who participated in the Algerian War of Independence) called for the application of Islam at all levels of the Algerian state. Sahnoun would be in and out of prison until 1984. Sahnoun is an important figure, in the Algerian Islamist scene, for he brought together all the different Algerian Islamist groups under an umbrella group *Rabitat al-Dawa* (Proselytizing League). Sahnoun would also be mentor to many leaders of the Islamist and militant Islamist factions. His ideas formed the vision for the FIS. Abbas Madani, Ali Belhaj, and Muhammad Saeed would form the FIS in 1989, the name encompassing room for Islamist groups in a front, and salvation would be the mission of bringing more Algerians to God. Other Leaders in the Islamist scene who refused to join the FIS was Mahfouz Nahnah, who would object to the concept of a front in favor of a political party, forming his own Islamic Social Party. Abdullah Jaballah did not want the limitation of joining a coalition of Islamists under the FIS and formed his own Islamic Renaissance Movement. It is important to pause and recognize the nuanced schisms inherent in local Islamist movements and one should ponder the impossible task that al-Qaida seeks in balancing global militant Islamist movements with local objectives. These Algerian Islamists like Madani, Belhadj, and Jaballah were a new generation of Islamists energized by the events of 1979, the Iranian Revolution in particular, and the Soviet-Afghan War. They opposed French colonization in their teen-age years, and grew up opposing the ruling FLN as adults.

### ***Why Studying Political Philosophy Matters to America's Military Planners?***

Political philosophy is important, as it brings America's military leaders and planners closer to understanding the human terrain of a troubled region. The United States is interested in Algeria from a counter-terrorism perspective because of the containment of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb in southern Algeria, and their attempts at destabilizing such North African states as Mali and Mauretania. Understanding the evolution of Islamist political philosophy enables us to distinguish those who advocate those ideas peacefully versus those who may join al-Qaida affiliates to impose these ideas by force. The FIS believes Islam is applicable to all problems at all times. It encompasses all economic, political and social problems. FIS has absorbed elements of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood political theory in its declarations and manifestos. The FIS declares the Quran (Islamic Book of Divine Revelation) and *Sunnah* (traditions of Prophet Muhammad) as the foundation of their ideology, and advocate these traditions as the basis of legislation in Algeria. The model they wish to impose to the exclusion of other Islamic interpretations is the Salafist model, a return to the pious founders of Islam. This is a problem, as it excludes Maliki Sunni Muslims and Sufis who make up majority of North Africans.

As the FIS had no clear political agenda, its 1989 memoranda submitted to the government offers the clearest insight into their political philosophy. Elements of their agenda are encompassed in this partial list below:

- The President must apply *Shariah* (Islamic law). Does not say which interpretation of Shariah, but likely a Salafi model, unacceptable to Sufis, Maliki Sunnis, and Kabyles tribes who wish to infuse their tribal culture with Islam.
- The Judiciary must implement *hisbah* (Morals enforcement). Who determines what's moral?
- The Education system must be reformed.
- Preserve women's right inside the home and preserve the dignity of women.

- Reform of internal security, elections, and fiscal policy.
- Address the problem of (Algeria's) economic flight.
- Protection of Algerian migrants (in Europe). A populist agenda, as many Algerians view with concern the treatment of fellow countrymen in Europe.
- Extend aid to Palestine against Israel and Afghanistan against the Soviets. A wider Arab and Islamic areas of concern to gain popular appeal.
- Cessation of media attacks on the Islamist movement.
- Punishment for those deemed anti-Islamic.
- Opposition to the complete isolation of Islam from the state, open markets, and westernization of the Algerian people.
- Suppression of French culture in Algerian public life.

The highlighted lists of demands impinge upon individual freedoms, and are bound to cause friction in Algerian society. The FIS envisioned itself as a bulwark against westernization generally and France specifically. FIS political philosophy represented a clear dichotomy between attaining power through brute force versus a more gradualist approach to the current structure of power.

### ***The Battle of the ISMS, Socialism and Islamism in Modern Algeria: The Use of Ideology for Political Advantage***

Under Ahmed Ben Bella, Algeria's third president (1963-1965), and Houari Boumediene, the fourth president (1965-1978), the Islamist credentials were abandoned and socialism adopted as an expedient means to nationalize French industries in Algeria and colonial businesses (French owned farms, and other businesses in Algeria). In addition, the ideology of socialism enabled the ruling factions within the FLN to maintain distance from those members who maintained an Islamist vision for Algeria. Socialism was used internally to reign in those revolutionaries with an Islamist vision, and engage in the redistribution of wealth, in particular land holdings. In addition, Algeria's early experimentation with socialism drew that country closer to the Soviet sphere. This provided Algeria access to weapons and technology on the one hand, while simultaneously maintaining close ties with the wave of populist pan-Arabism sweeping from Egypt outward. FLN leaders could easily claim kinship to the charismatic Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel-Nasser, as Nasser's movement was called the Arab Socialist Union which was founded in 1962.

Algeria's socialist experimentation in the agricultural sector would be a disaster, and the country became more dependent on natural gas as a source of revenue. Arabization policies forced by the FLN and stimulated by pan-Arabism would alienate the *Kabyles* (tribes). The Kabyles were part of an ancient Berber heritage that predates the arrival of the Arabs and Islam. While Kabyles retain Islam as their faith, they have resisted attempts at Arab assimilation. In 1967, the Six Day War so discredited Nasser and pan-Arabism that the reaction of Algerian leaders was to cling ever tighter to socialism.

By the death of President Boumediene in 1978, the FLN that used the symbols and orthodoxy of Islam to gain independence evolved in to neo-colonialists, and a dictatorial regime imposing single-party rule. The state, represented by the FLN, came to serve the bureaucracy, and not the other way around. For instance, gas industries were used to uphold a system of bureaucratic patronage, and the security services to include the army were provided subsidies to protect the regime. It was only in 2005 that Algerian military personnel could vote outside of

barracks, thanks to gradual reforms Algeria would be a top down political society, engaging in command economics. The FLN gradually became identified as neo-colonialists engaging in a struggle against Algeria's tribes on the one hand and Islamists on the other. In 1980, the FLN attempting to focus on subjugating tribal uprisings (known as the 1980 Spring Tribal Uprising), making small concessions to the Islamists culminating in the passage in 1984 of an Islamic-based family law code. The Islamists were hungry for more political influence and overreached by calling the FLN to link Islam to the affairs of the state. Worsening economic conditions from 1980 to 1988, coupled with problematic relationship of the FLN with the Soviets, during the Soviet-Afghan war, made the Islamist alternative appealing. Some took to the Islamist alternative out of true ideological convictions, many others as a form of protest of the bureaucratic state elites of the FLN, now simply nicknamed, "*Le Pouvoir*," The Power.



*Houari Boumediene Algeria's leader from 1965 to 1978, instrumental in Arabization policies and failed socio-economic experiments in Algeria.*

*Source: [http://www.maroc-hebdo.press.ma/MHinternet/Archives\\_458/ph\\_458/boumed1.jpg](http://www.maroc-hebdo.press.ma/MHinternet/Archives_458/ph_458/boumed1.jpg)*



*Ahmed Ben Bella, Algeria's Third President and Egyptian Pan-Arab Leader Gamal Abdel-Nasser who was visiting shortly after Algerian independence was declared in 1962. Source: Al-Ahram Egyptian Newspaper.*

Attempts to reassert one party rule by the FLN would backfire with riots in 1988. Under this climate Ali Belhaj and Abbas Madani created the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS). To address the unrest in Algeria, President Chadli Bendjadid (1979-1992) embarked on a plan to conduct multi-party elections and amended the Algerian constitution to allow multi-party elections. Bendjadid, was confident that the FIS would not win against other parties, and he anticipated showing the FLN's dominance in the polls. The opposite occurred, and in 1990, the FIS swept municipal elections, and stood poised to win in the 1991 general elections. The results of these elections demonstrated an Algeria divided among the FLN (status-quo), the Socialist Forces Front (FFS) (representing tribal interests) and the FIS (representing Islamists). The majority of votes in Algeria's urban areas went to the FIS and their Islamist agenda. The FFS, swept in tribal areas and maintained the autonomy of Kabyles culture, language and heritage.

The FIS began an imposition of Islamic morals, and ignored other interpretations of Islam, leading to fears they were changing Algeria's Islamic and cultural norms. Algerians

returning from the Soviet-Afghan War began to impose a Deobandi (North Indian)-Wahhabi (Saudi) mixture of Islam alien to Algerian Maliki Sunnis and Sufis. The infiltration of Algerians who had fought the Soviets, had a radicalizing impact on the FIS and compounded the problems with the state and in particular the armed forces. In 1992, the Algerian army, typically seen as the preservers of the status-quo stepped in and nullified the FIS's electoral gains but removed President Bendjadid, who was seen as bringing about this instability. Bendjadid's political experimentation with multi-party elections netted a clear win for the FIS and was resented by Algeria's elites, and the military. A civil war would ensue that would last a decade, and cost an estimated 250,000 lives. The FIS had an armed military faction - the *Groupe Islamique Armée* (GIA), but after several years of civil war most elements of the GIA reconciled. The irreconcilables among the GIA formed the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le 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.

While each bifurcation brought a smaller more militant cadre, these militant Islamists within Algeria would be nourished by external elements with the global Militant Islamist movement and in particular militant Islamists operating in Europe. Among the best insider look into this phenomenon is 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.

### ***Current Issues (2007-Present)***

In 2007, Abbas Madani and the FIS opposed the amendment to the Algerian constitution so President Abdul-Aziz Bouteflika could run for a third term. The FIS, although technically illegal in Algerian political life, has endorsed a National Unity Conference to heal the wounds of the civil war. The FIS is becoming more a political party and shedding its militancy, which led al-Qaida to distance itself from the group, lending its name and support to AQIM. Abdullah Anas, FIS member, Soviet-Afghan War veteran, and son-in-law to Abdullah Azzam, the spiritual founder of al-Qaida, has publicly turned against the group, and charges Zawahiri with the murder of his father-in-law. In 2010, AQIM is attempting to carve itself an operating base along the Algerian-Mali border. U.S. Special Operations (Task Force 103) is training the Malian military to root out AQIM, and Algerian forces have attempted to contain these militant Islamists in southern Algeria.

### ***Conclusion***

Algeria has utilized various political theories as a means of gaining political advantage. The FLN used Islamic symbols and morals enforcement to control neighborhoods during the revolutionary war of independence. It then experimented with socialism as a means of distinguishing among FLN members with an Islamist versus a secular outlook. In Afghanistan, General David Petraeus is grappling with the complexities of dealing with reconcilable elements of the Taliban. There may be lessons learned in the Algerian experience with the FIS and its armed wing reconciled, and those who refused to reconcile formed the GSPC which then evolved into al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The key to the marginalizing of AQIM and containment to the Sahara has been its unpopularity among the Algerian populace coupled

with a chance for amnesty for those wanting to leave the militant Islamist lifestyle. America's military planners must be afforded the opportunity to delve into the political philosophy and writings of Islamists and militant Islamists. They offer the insights into their perception of conflict, and allow us the ability to create counter-narratives to fragments of Islam, history, and pseudo-intellectualism that al-Qaida and their ideologues weave. The biggest victory will be making the militant Islamist ideological alternative less appealing to a wider segment of the region's populace by offering alternative narratives and deconstructing ideologies that are fragmented, selective, and pseudo-intellectual.



*Ali Belhadj (left) and Abbas Madani (right) founders of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front. Source: Le Monde, at verna.blog.lemonde.fr*

*Emblem of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Source: fisweb.org*

*Commander Aboul-Enein is author of "Militant Islamist Ideology: Understanding the Global Threat," recently published by Naval Institute Press. He recently graduated from the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, and will be teaching there part-time as Adjunct Military Professor and Islamic Studies Chair. CDR Aboul-Enein wishes to thank Dr. William Knowlton and Dr. Christina Lafferty of the Industrial College of the Armed Forces for their patient advice that enhanced the piece. In addition, CDR Scott Olivolo, MSC, USN who is completing his graduate studies in International Relations with the American Military University for his edits and discussion that enhanced this essay. Finally, statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.*

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