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The Shifting Foundations of Political Islam in Algeria

Dalia Ghanem

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

Carnegie Middle East Center
Emir Bechir Street, Lazarieh Tower
Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061
Riad El Solh, Lebanon
P: + 961 1 99 15 91
F: + 961 1 99 15 91
Carnegie-MEC.org

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+ CONTENTS

Introduction	1
The Birth of Political Islam in Algeria	3
Mixing Hard and Soft Approaches to Combat Jihadism	6
Postconflict Islamist Parties	11
Grassroots Political Islam Makes Inroads	15
Conclusion	20
About the Author	20
Notes	21

Introduction

Starting in February 2019, thousands and later millions of Algerians took to the streets to voice their displeasure with their ailing eighty-two-year-old president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who sought to run for what would have been a fifth term. After weeks of peaceful and orderly mass protests, the long-standing president resigned in April 2019, before a new election could be held. As this new “battle of Algiers” continues to unfold, some Algerian and European observers have warned that Islamists will try to infiltrate the movement.¹ Their fear is that Islamists may seek to recreate the conditions that prevailed in the 1990s when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) exploited the country’s 1989 democratic opening to call for the establishment of an Islamic state; jihadi violence erupted after the military interrupted the electoral process in 1991, and the country descended into a decade-long civil war (1991–2001).

Such reignited fears overlook the sociopolitical changes that Algeria has gone through since the civil war ended, particularly the legacy of the conflict, the trauma it generated, and the transformation that the country’s Islamist movement has undergone since then. The Islamists have had virtually no role in the historic mobilization that has been shaking the Algerian regime for the past two months. The country’s Islamist parties joined the popular movement only belatedly, and by the second week of the demonstrations, citizens on social media were calling for vigilance against the “hijacking” of the movement especially by Islamists.² Algerian society is deeply marked by the violence that the FIS left in its wake in the 1990s. Today, as one protester put it, “we are vaccinated against the FIS and its excesses.”³

In the wake of the civil war, the Algerian government has succeeded in neutralizing the more extremist jihadi manifestations of political Islam by combining a soft and a hard approach. The authorities have paired a strong military presence on the ground to fight armed groups with conciliatory measures aimed at disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating former extremists into society.

While the government has achieved progress, it would be an exaggeration to say that political Islam in Algeria is no more. Undoubtedly, thousands of former jihadists have been rehabilitated, jihadi activity has fallen markedly, and the number of fatalities from terrorist attacks has steadily declined, but the risk of jihadi violence has not fully abated.⁴ Attacks by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, and their affiliates are not beyond the realm of possibility.⁵ Most Algerians condemn the violence of these jihadi groups and do not support them, but as long as the country is plagued by political exclusion, economic marginalization and social disparities, oppression, and occasional bouts of violence, there will be at least some people who wrongheadedly yield to the temptation to embrace jihadism.⁶

The influence of Algeria's Islamist politicians has also waned, as ordinary citizens have shown their hostility toward the representatives of moderate political Islam. During the recent protests, for instance, Abdallah Djaballah, a longtime prominent Islamist leader who now heads the Justice and Development Front (FJD), was driven away by demonstrators who shouted "dégage" (which means "get out").⁷ Abderrezak Makri, who leads Algeria's first major Islamist party, the Movement for Society and Peace (MSP), was similarly marginalized and received with general public indifference.⁸ The lack of popularity of these two leading figures of moderate political Islam indicates the Islamist parties' lack of credibility, legitimacy, and public support.

In a sense, by letting Islamist parties enter parliamentary politics and even participate in government coalitions, the Algerian authorities have succeeded in defusing moderate embodiments of political Islam. On one level, the participatory approach that moderate Islamists have followed in Algeria since 1995 has sustained them and allowed them to professionalize their cadres. But this political participation has allowed the regime to co-opt these Islamists, robbing these moderates of their legitimacy in the eyes of the public and hindering their capacity to mobilize voters.⁹ Many citizens see these Islamists as being as corrupt as the regime's old guard. Few Algerians today believe the image of religious purity that the Islamists have tried to display nor in the spiritual utopia that they have promised. As such, mainstream Islamist parties are unlikely to regain their credibility in the near future or have any considerable role in the popular movement that forced Bouteflika from office. Instead, these co-opted parties are likely to keep accepting the rules of the game to have a place in the transition being supervised by the Algerian military.

While the moderate Islamist politicians have been co-opted and do not constitute a real challenge to the regime, other more grassroots manifestations of political Islam such as Dawa Salafiya are taking root in society. Dawa Salafiya is sometimes identified as a form of quietist Salafism, as the movement does not engage in overt political action and does not aim to overthrow the government. Despite this reputation for apoliticism, many Dawa members have strong political views and comment prolifically on political events. So although members of the Dawa Salafiya do not directly engage in political activities, the movement's shuyukh contribute to discourse on national and international politics.¹⁰ As aptly put by scholar Jacob Olidort, "The silence of the quietists is the space in which one hears the political voice of Salafi activists. . . . Their political actions are quiet, but their political voice is loud."¹¹

While Dawa Salafiya eschews formal participation in politics, it is now the mainstream Islamist societal movement in Algeria, and its influence is growing. Algerians are renovating Islamist politics from the ground up. While the country's Islamists grasp that founding an Islamic caliphate in Algeria is a bridge too far, they are still not willing to renounce the goal of Islamizing society at large or to embrace a pluralistic public square. As of April 2019, the Algerian government has not entirely neutralized the challenge of political Islam, and the state

acknowledges that Islamists will remain a part of the country's sociopolitical scene for the foreseeable future.

That being said, understanding how the Algerian government has dealt with political Islam in the past provides an important window for trying to grasp how the regime and the country's various Islamist groups are likely to navigate the uncertain political terrain ahead.

The Birth of Political Islam in Algeria

Algeria's brand of political Islam can be traced back to the 1920s and the reformist movement headed by several ulema (scholars) such as Abdelhamid Ben Badis. The ulema called for Algerians to return to the sources of Islam by purifying the faith from the supposedly corrupting influence of marabouts (Muslim holy men) and mystical beliefs and by pushing for Arabization. In 1931, these ulema formed the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema (AOMA), a religious organization that predated the country's bid for independence. The association called for the purification of Islam and sought to restore genuine Islamic culture for the Algerian people.

The Early Years

Algeria gained independence in 1962, and a year later former militants from the AOMA like Abdullatif Soltani and nationalist reformists like el Hachemi Tidjani established an association called el Qiyam el Islamiyah (Islamic Values). The organization, commonly called el Qiyam for short, built on the thoughts of the leading theorist of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, and defended Islamic values in Algeria by advocating the Islamization of public life.

To thwart Islamists that were bitter about the nature of the newly independent state, which was far from the Islamic republic they had envisioned, the Algerian regime tried to give itself an air of religious legitimacy. To do so, the country's leaders established the concept of Islamic socialism, a notion that reconciled Islamic principles with the government's official modernist and secularist discourse. With appeals to the masses (via populist socialism) and the ummah, or the community of Muslim believers, (via traditional Islam), Algeria's first president, Ahmed Ben Bella, and his successor, Houari Boumédiène, tried to bring together modernism and traditionalism.

Yet many Islamists disapproved of this approach. El Qiyam published a pamphlet stating that "any regime, any leader who does not rely on Islam, is declared illegal and dangerous. A communist party, a secular party, a socialist-Marxist party, a nationalist party cannot exist in the land of Islam."¹² The Algerian government eventually banned el Qiyam in 1966 after the group sent then Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser a telegram urging him to postpone Qutb's

execution. Still, el Qiyam had an important impact on the Islamist movement in Algeria, where the association was a gateway for radical Islamism. It laid the groundwork for what followed in the 1980s and 1990s. During that period, the Islamists successfully pressured the state to allow the country's religious conservatives to promote an Arabization agenda and wield considerable influence over the country's schools and the state bureaucracy, and its members positioned themselves as arbiters of morality over Algerian society. As a result, the Islamists took advantage of the democratization of Algeria's educational system and the government's Arabization policy to further spread their ideology.¹³ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, these Islamists were very active in universities and mosques as they mobilized students to challenge the regime and encouraged violent political activism.

To counter these inroads that the Islamist groups were making and to burnish its claim of religious legitimacy, the regime imposed and intensified Arabization measures, encouraged the construction of new mosques, held regular seminars on Islamic studies, established Islamic institutes, and published a journal called *Asala* (authenticity). The regime also gave specific religious figures a great deal of freedom in terms of theological interpretation on the condition that they avoided any criticism of the regime and helped teach Algerians that socialism was only a contemporary variant of Islamic social justice.

The regime sought such cover hoping that this would make it more difficult for the Islamists to oppose its rule, but in reality, the Islamists contested the state's religious legitimacy again and again. The government's co-existence with the Islamists repeatedly devolved into confrontation first in the mid-1970s, again in the early 1980s, and finally throughout the 1990s when the struggle reached its climax during the civil war with violent Islamist jihadists.

From Ballots to Bullets

During this period, Algeria's heterogeneous Islamist movement was composed of several factions or schools of thought.¹⁴ Despite the Islamist movement's amorphous nature and internal differences, all of its factions agreed on one general strategy: preaching and proselytizing in mosques and universities. Their ideas spread over the course of the 1980s, and political Islam gained newfound momentum. With a firm foothold on campuses nationwide, the Islamist movement gained more followers among the country's first postindependence generation, who had been disappointed by the educational system and disheartened by the lack of professional opportunities. The Islamists' discourse convinced many members of this first postindependence generation that the Western model of modernization envisioned by the Algerian state was a failure. Their vision of political Islam offered an alternative system that extolled the country's Arab and Islamic values; offered citizens a heightened consciousness of this identity; and claimed

to furnish solutions that would lead to a better way of life, social justice, and a redistribution of political power and economic wealth.

Although these various segments of the movement disagreed on many matters, their leaders and partisans came together in 1989 to create the FIS. The FIS gave political Islam in Algeria a more formal organizational structure for the first time, and the group went on to serve as the government's main antagonist in the country's lengthy civil war. The FIS opposed the country's leaders, whom it perceived as *mustabid* (despots) and *taghut* (those who rebel against God or who are idolatrous) presiding over what it deemed to be an impious democracy that was irreligious because it stemmed from neither the traditions of the Sunna nor sharia.¹⁵

Yet it was that same supposedly impious democracy that the FIS used to try to gain power. In the local elections of June 1990, the FIS drew 54.3 percent of the votes for the Popular Communal Assemblies and secured 57.4 percent of the votes for the Popular Wilaya Assemblies.¹⁶ In the first round of the December 1991 national legislative elections, the FIS obtained 188 out of 231 contested seats in the People's National Assembly; the remaining 199 of the assembly's 430 total seats were supposed to be decided in a second round election slated for mid-January 1992 that was never held.¹⁷ The military called off the second wave of voting days before ballots were to be cast and took full control of the country. The FIS was banned, and thousands of its sympathizers were jailed. Divisions arose with the ranks of the FIS between those who remained committed in principle to peaceful elections and those who called for violent opposition to the state.

Those who advocated using force against the government did not wait for the electoral process to be interrupted before they unleashed violence. They instigated a deadly attack on Guemmar in November 1991 (before the election's first round the following month) that was led by an Algerian veteran of the war in Afghanistan. The interruption of the electoral process and the ensuing indiscriminate violence by the security forces triggered further violence. This violent streak reinforced the radical wing of the Islamist movement's deeply held conviction that the only possible strategy was the use of force and that a peaceful political approach had proven to be a vain endeavor.

As a result, jihadi groups mushroomed around the country, the most prominent one being the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). The FIS aligned itself with the GIA's call for jihad as the only viable way to establish an Islamic state, and it created a military force called the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS). But the FIS/AIS duo failed from a military standpoint because it neglected to contain the GIA's extreme violence against civilians and its own members. The pairing also failed on political grounds, as it proved unable to unify Algeria's Islamists and get its organizational ban lifted.¹⁸ After a decade of fighting, the Algerian state finally overcame its jihadi foes and reasserted its hold on power.

Mixing Hard and Soft Approaches to Combat Jihadism

That victory proved to be hard-won. The indiscriminate violence inflicted by the security forces was counterproductive and prompted many Algerian youth to become radicalized and turn to violence, joining jihadi groups in search of protection, respect, or revenge. Individuals who had long felt ignored and marginalized by the authorities joined and supported groups like the GIA. As a result, entire villages and towns fell under the sway of the GIA, which strictly applied sharia principles and administered their local affairs amid the governance breakdown that accompanied the war.

But public support for the GIA eventually decreased and abated when the group's violence became indiscriminate and targeted people who once had offered it moral and material support. Eventually, many Algerian citizens turned to the authorities to ask for help and were armed by the state to protect themselves. When these islands of resistance began appearing in jihadist-held parts of the country, the Algerian authorities shifted their strategy. While they multiplied the military and counterterrorism operations on the ground and continued hounding jihadi groups—pursuing them as far as the country's borders with Tunisia—the authorities also invested in development assistance to tackle violent radicalization at its roots and offered jihadists a way out by implementing a reconciliation policy to demobilize, disarm, and reintegrate former fighters who were willing to renounce violence.

The Security-Led Approach

Early on in the war from 1992 to 1995, the Algerian authorities were nearly overwhelmed by the scale of the violence and the strength of the opposing armed groups, especially the GIA. Many analysts at the time predicted that the regime would fall and that the Islamists would rise to power. Instead, the country's security apparatus headed by the People's National Army (PNA) proved to be highly capable, cohesive, and effective. As Theda Skocpol has explained, a state can remain reasonably stable, invulnerable to a revolt by the masses even after having undergone significant delegitimization, if its repressive apparatus remains cohesive and serviceable.¹⁹

The authorities employed a security-led approach in the first years of the conflict (between 1992 and 1995). By rescheduling the repayment of its external debt in 1995, the Algerian authorities were able to reallocate some funds for modernizing the army. The state sought to modernize Algeria's military forces and provide them with advanced technology, and the government also strove to professionalize the country's customs personnel and the police.

Although some young people joined armed jihadi groups during this time, many also joined the PNA, especially those from small and medium towns located in the interior of the country.²⁰ The army offered recruits great professional opportunities with good benefits as well as the possibility to

leave their little towns for a better life, participate in the fight against terrorism, and protect their country, as depicted in PNA public relations campaigns that helped greatly enhance its image.

The PNA conducted sweeps and air strikes in rural areas (such as Douar Béni Zermane, Douar Béni Aref, and Attaba), as well as in mountainous places (like Mount Zbarbar and Mount Chr ea). Police forces were mobilized in urban areas, and the Gendarmerie Nationale (a national rural police force) carried out operations in both urban and rural zones. The air force, the gendarmerie, the police, and special forces personnel actively assisted the army on large-scale operations like the Battle of A n Defla. During that operation in March 1995, the army reportedly killed approximately 800 jihadists in the cities of Oran and Arzew as well as the Djurdjura Mountains.²¹ Over time, Algeria’s security forces significantly reduced the strength of the jihadi armed groups and recovered important stocks of weapons. Captured jihadists were crucial for helping the state and its supporters gather intelligence and foil further attacks.

The Algerian state also created auxiliary forces that helped turn the tide in the conflict. In 1994, the state created a series of militias (with an estimated 200,000 members) to operate in the most remote parts of the country.²² Moreover, the time period of conscription was extended to eighteen months. Approximately 15,000 reservists were called into service in May 1995 for twelve months to help keep the country secure.²³ They aided the government in fighting armed groups, protecting citizens, and preventing the reestablishment of armed groups in liberated areas, which allowed people to return home. These forces greatly helped weaken the armed jihadi groups, which lost more than 6,000 fighters between 1994 and 1996.²⁴

Preventing Violent Extremism

Understanding that a security-led approach would not be enough to fight jihadism and to regain legitimacy in the eyes of the public, the Algerian regime took advantage of the rescheduling of the country’s debt to invest in development, unlocking nearly \$20 billion.²⁵ The government initiated a raft of economic reforms, including structural adjustment measures through price liberalization, the partial liberalization of the country’s protectionist economy to allow more foreign trade, and the encouragement of foreign investment. These reforms helped the government secure the private and international partners it needed to maintain itself both financially and militarily, since these measures furnished funds that could be used to modernize its military forces as well as its repressive security apparatus.

International aid and these reforms in 1995 allowed the regime to bolster social welfare programs for housing, employment, healthcare, and infrastructure. That same year, the government increased the funding allocated for housing credits from \$10 million to \$15 million and set aside \$2.2 billion for food and medicine as well as \$2.2 billion for capital goods.²⁶ By better meeting the needs of the

population, the regime began calming social tensions and curbing the expansion of violent jihadi extremism by countering it at its roots.

Administrative changes within the country's state-level governments followed. Fearing that Islamists had penetrated the political system—as many provincial governors (or *wali*) had close relationships with armed groups—and wishing to reestablish a monopoly on the country's governing structures, the state dismissed many officials who had worked in customs or public administration. Newly appointed *wali* were charged with implementing a national policy designed to help unemployed young people secure jobs. Government officials encouraged the military and a variety of state-owned enterprises to recruit more young graduates, as roughly 150,000 jobs materialized between 1994 and 1996.²⁷ Over that same time period, local committees were set up to study potential investment projects, and a government agency for promoting and monitoring investment registered 900 new projects involving local entrepreneurs that created between 70,000 and 100,000 additional jobs.²⁸

In addition to these efforts to bolster employment, the government tackled the country's major housing problems by announcing the construction of a substantial number of new residential units in May 1995.²⁹ In addition, the state instituted a policy to provide limited funds and other forms of support to help citizens return home after fleeing for security reasons. Between 1993 and 1997, the number of Algerian internally displaced persons (IDPs) reached 1.5 million, many of whom settled mainly on the outskirts of major urban centers. To help these Algerians return to their homes and redress the unequal distribution of inhabitants, the government undertook a national redevelopment policy. But a mere 170,000 of the IDPs went back home while 1.3 million continued to live on the fringes of the cities where they had resettled.³⁰ Still, these various measures helped begin restoring public confidence in the state and curtailing the recruitment of violent jihadi extremists.

Conciliatory Measures

The Algerian government first attempted to begin reconciling with its jihadi foes in 1995. Then president Liamine Zéroual unveiled a clemency law that urged jihadists to abandon violence and reintegrate into society under certain conditions. The Algerian military and the AIS conducted secret talks, and the AIS's national emir Madani Mezrag eventually announced a unilateral ceasefire in 1997, an important moment that marked the start of a long road to national recovery. It seems as though Mezrag calculated that it was crucial for the AIS to distance itself from the extreme violence of the GIA, but his decision to engage with the regime was also a question of survival. The AIS had been greatly weakened by a two-front struggle against the state security forces as well as the GIA, which had started a purge against other FIS and AIS members in April 1995. At the same time, the GIA obstinately refused to entertain the possibility of talks with the government or a truce. Merzag's charismatic leadership, the centralized structure of the AIS, and the group's openness to pursuing talks with the government allowed him to open lines of communication with the regime. Meanwhile,

the GIA's decentralized structure and the deaths of key leaders reduced its influence over the insurgents' decision of whether or not to pursue rapprochement with the government. In the end, approximately 7,000 fighters (including 800 GIA combatants) renounced violence and laid down their weapons right after the ceasefire.³¹

When former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika came to power (1999–2019), he effectively extended the clemency law by enacting the 1999 Civil Harmony Law, which garnered widespread support in a subsequent national referendum.³² In theory, former jihadists were eligible for conditional amnesty if they had not been involved in particularly grievous offenses such as collective rape, massacre, or setting bombs in public spaces. For those who had committed such acts, the law allowed for reduced prison sentences. But in practice, things were less straightforward. Because of the sheer number of fighters and cases and the lack of evidence in many instances, it was highly difficult for the authorities to authenticate jihadists' claims of innocence. Virtually any former jihadists that yielded and denied committing such offenses were pardoned.³³ The government took this approach to spur jihadists that were still holding out to turn themselves in.

Six years later, the Algerian government enacted the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. Building on the earlier Civil Harmony Law, the charter indemnified state security personnel and government-friendly militias from responsibility for extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances during the war. FIS members were forbidden from engaging in any political activities, although the authorities enlisted some of the organization's leading figures such as Rabeh Kébir, Anwar Haddam, and Mustapha Kertali to endorse the reconciliation policy. Other former jihadists were given a platform on primetime television to talk about their motivations for joining jihadi groups and their decision to defect. This campaign helped raise public awareness about the dangers of violent extremism, gave the reconciliation policy an additional layer of legitimacy, and discouraged others from joining or remaining a part of the jihadi cause.³⁴

To help former jihadists reintegrate into society, prevent recidivism, and fend off economic hardship, the authorities offered them substantial financial compensation. Social enterprises, state-owned enterprises, and private companies offered former fighters professional opportunities. These job-centered rehabilitation efforts were critical because they provided former jihadists with a sense of belonging, pride and dignity, and a restored conception of citizenship. In doing so, the Algerian authorities undercut the appeal of being recruited by jihadi groups.

Post-Civil War Jihadism in Algeria

As a result of the Algerian government's soft and hard approaches, at least an estimated 15,000 former jihadists renounced violence.³⁵ Due to the state's successful efforts to crack down on jihadism and address its root causes, combined with public anger over the GIA's indiscriminate violence, the

jihadi group's strength and influence plummeted, and it ceased to be a major actor on the Algerian jihadi scene. Some former GIA members resurfaced in 1997 to form an offshoot called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, a group that subsequently merged with local al-Qaeda affiliates in 2007 and rebranded itself as AQIM.

After the violence-plagued 1990s, Algeria's security outlook has been far more stable since. In 2017, Gallup ranked Algeria as the seventh-safest country in the world.³⁶ Nonetheless, the risk of jihadi violence is not nonexistent, and even if AQIM does not constitute an existential threat as its predecessor did in the 1990s, sporadic, localized jihadi activity remains a nuisance. A source inside the Algerian army estimates that there are still between 500 to 1,000 jihadists operating in the country.³⁷ The population's support for jihadi groups in general and for AQIM, in particular, is weak as proven by the loss of AQIM's last bastion in the Berber hinterlands.³⁸ In addition, the losses of several jihadi leaders and assets have taken a toll. The Algerian security forces have continued to vigilantly pressure AQIM especially since the Arab Spring uprisings and what followed in the Sahel region when northern Mali fell into the hands of AQIM.

In Algeria itself, AQIM is highly mobile and works in small, detached cells, striking randomly and using suicide bombings to make its moves even more difficult to predict. While it is true that AQIM failed to pass on its dream of a caliphate to a new generation of Algerians, the group has continued to gain limited traction among some members of a generation that understand how heavily the government has curtailed their participation in national politics. This new generation of jihadists was raised in the heat of the civil war when the GIA had excommunicated virtually the entire Algerian population and was still launching massacres all over the Mitidja Plain and in the interior of the country. These jihadists are products of their violent environment, as many of them are children of killed or imprisoned jihadists. They tend to be attracted by the transnational jihadism AQIM claims to offer and the chance to fight in places like Libya, Mali, and Tunisia. The appeal of jihadi groups might be higher in southern Algeria where social discontent and the government's inability to translate financial wealth into inclusive growth has led to violent clashes and the radicalization of some youth.

In a nutshell, the Algerian government has largely succeeded in containing jihadism by deploying security forces on a massive scale, conducting continuous military operations, and backing a policy of national reconciliation, however imperfect it is. In the wake of Bouteflika's resignation, the country is going through a sensitive period and a key political transition. The succession issue remains open-ended. Nonetheless, this turmoil is temporary and the Algerian army, despite infighting, is poised to remain firmly in charge and will almost certainly continue to keep the threat of jihadi violence at bay.

Postconflict Islamist Parties

In the wake of the civil war, it was not just Algerian society that was reshaped but the country's political scene as well. The FIS's violent exit from the stage showed the limits of radical political Islam in the country. By the end of the 1990s, the FIS had been banned, its leadership had been overthrown, it was unable to control the violence its affiliates had unleashed, and it was kept from the negotiating table by its own military wing, the AIS. After all, it was Mezrag and not the leaders of the FIS (Ali Belhadj and Abbasi Madani) who convinced thousands of jihadists to lay down their weapons.

In a failed attempt to stage a comeback, some FIS figures decided to support the reconciliation process. They felt obligated to distance themselves and the party from the extremist violence of the jihadists. But the FIS was no longer the sociopolitical heavyweight that it had been in the early 1990s. Madani left Algeria for Qatar, where he lived until he passed away in April 2019, and Belhadj, once a charismatic orator, became passé.³⁹ Nearly three decades after it was outlawed, the FIS still has not been rehabilitated, and its political prisoners remain in jail.⁴⁰

The Divided House of Algerian Islamists

Algeria's civil war reshaped the country's political arena and its Islamist movement. Islamist parties like the MSP and Ennadha have been participating in Algerian politics since the government managed to reinstate constitutional processes and organize presidential elections in 1995 amid the fighting. This participatory approach led eventually to a dead end after the war concluded. Postconflict Islamist parties in Algeria neglected to project a coherent vision for the country or a workable set of policies to challenge the status quo and solve the socioeconomic problems plaguing ordinary Algerians.

To distance themselves from the radical expression of political Islam represented by the FIS and the jihadists, moderate Islamist parties such as the Nahnah-led MSP—formerly known as Hamas—and the Ennahda Party adopted a participation-driven strategy. Since then, moderate Islamists have been co-opted by the government so effectively that they have largely embraced the rules of Algeria's insular, venal political system. Today, these parties are unable to mobilize voters and do not constitute real challengers to the military-supported regime. This failure to enact change is a product of both their inability to get over their differences and their opportunistic desire to preserve their clientelist relationships with the regime.

Internal disputes within the ranks of these co-opted Islamist parties sometimes have led certain factions to break off to form their own smaller Islamist parties.⁴¹ These parties have been searching

for unity since the end of the civil war and harried by the critical question of whether or not to work with the government.

The 2009 presidential elections are a case in point. When disagreements ensued with the ranks of the MSP, several members abandoned the party to form their own organizations. The leader of the MSP, Aboudjerra Soltani, backed Bouteflika and joined the governing coalition. Abdelmadjid Menasra, the MSP's second-ranked leader, and his followers refused to go along with this strategy. They accused Soltani of violating the party's core principles and of making significant concessions to the government without consulting with either the party's base or with its leaders. Soltani had indeed marginalized the party's cadres and ousted a group of forty figures from the party who had disagreed with him in 2008 during his bid for reelection as the head of the party.⁴² Eventually Menasra left with hundreds of supporters and activists, including many national and local political figures, to create the Movement for Preaching and Change (MPC).

The MSP was further weakened by the defection of Amar Ghoul, another prominent member who had been minister of public works. Ghoul left in 2012 to establish his own party called the Rally of Algerian Hope (TAJ), which has a nationally minded Islamist platform; the new party successfully poached more than fifty parliamentarians and a few thousand local government officials.⁴³ These two significant events have left the MSP weakened and hemorrhaging support as it competes with the MPC and the TAJ for the same voters.

Algeria's other major Islamist party, Ennahda, similarly has been plagued by divisions and serves as another enlightening example of the Islamists' inability to unite. Ennahda, a party formerly known as the Movement of Islamic Nahda and which was inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, was shaken by a severe internal crisis in the 1990s between one of its leaders, Lahbib Adami, and one of the party's founders, Abdallah Djaballah. Again, the dispute was over whether or not to work with the government. Adami called for dialogue with the state while Djaballah rejected this approach and sought to hold the government at arm's length. Adami eventually deposed Djaballah and rechristened the party as Ennahda.⁴⁴ Djaballah left and formed a separate Islamist party called el Islah (the Reform), from which he was again ousted and replaced by Djahid Younsi, who accused Djaballah of having archaic views and lacking a sense of structure and organization. Once more, Djaballah exited and created a third party in 2011 called the Front for Justice and Development (el Adala).

These disputes and offshoots have rendered Algeria's Islamist parties weak, discredited, and incapable of mobilizing supporters. They have witnessed several setbacks even during the Islamist wave of the Arab Spring that shook the wider region starting in late 2010. Indeed, even as Islamists were winning in neighboring countries like Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, Algerian Islamists were unable to capitalize on that success at home. To achieve the best results for Islamists in Algeria's May 2012

legislative elections, the MSP (which had been in a presidential alliance since 2004), Ennahda, and el Islah joined forces in the Green Algeria Alliance (AAV).

With neighboring peers like the Party for Justice and Development in Morocco and Ennahda in Tunisia turning in impressive performances, the AAV was convinced that it would secure a significant victory in Algeria; one of the party's leaders suggested before the votes were tallied that at least 120 of the available 462 legislative seats at stake could be won.⁴⁵ The results were disastrous for the Islamists, who secured only forty-eight seats, fewer than the fifty-two seats that the MSP had acquired alone in 2007.⁴⁶ A few months later in the November 2012 municipal elections, Islamists faced the worst electoral results since the advent of Algeria's multiparty system. The AAV, this time without the MSP, which had withdrawn from the bloc, secured an absolute majority in only ten out of 1,451 municipalities. The results of the 2017 elections were similarly disappointing for the Islamist camp.⁴⁷

This electoral dysfunction has reigned over presidential politics too. The Islamists' last attempt to settle on a single presidential candidate was in 2009 when Younsi of el Islah ran and obtained a negligible share of the vote (less than 1.4 percent).⁴⁸ Before that, Djaballah ran a short-lived campaign in 1999. As a result of this track record, it seems safe to say that in the upcoming elections (originally slated for April 2019 but since postponed until July 4) the Islamists—who have been largely rejected by many of the protesters that ousted Bouteflika—are likely to fail again to rally behind a single standard bearer.⁴⁹

The Corroding Allure of Islamist Opportunism

The second reason for the declining influence of Islamist parties in Algerian politics is their tendency to focus on the regime rather than society. By fixating on preserving their relations with the state, these Islamist parties no longer pay attention to ordinary Algerians' needs and interests. Even as the leaders of these parties continue denouncing the state's methods, they have busied themselves with maintaining access to the corridors of power and securing benefits and privileges from state actors that many Algerians see as akin to the corruption the state has long been known for.⁵⁰

The MSP is an instructive example. The party has been largely co-opted by the government since the 1990s. Even before the civil war ended, when the regime—having outlawed the FIS—needed a nonthreatening yet legitimate actor to replace the radical FIS on the political stage. The MSP, as the leading Islamist party today, has a history of caring more about its relationship with the regime, its share of resources, and its political visibility than about advocating for political reforms. As a result of this co-optation, the party's popular appeal has been and remains weak, as does its ability to spur public engagement.⁵¹

Early on, the MSP's penchant for rapprochement was an attempt to denounce the armed violence of the 1990s and distance itself from the FIS's radical views. Its founder, Nahnah, advocated for what he called *el marhaliya* (gradualism), *el musharak* (participation), and *el itidal* (moderation).⁵² Later, the MSP supported the state's decision to establish the National Transitional Council, which performed legislative functions in the absence of an elected parliament. As a result, several MSP cadres, the most prominent being Sheikh Mohamed Bouslimani, were killed by the GIA, which refused to accept any dialogue with what it viewed as the impious authorities.⁵³ In 1995, the MSP took part in the relaunch of the democratic process, and Nahnah finished in second place after the army's winning presidential candidate, Z roual. In 1999, after he was disqualified for procedural reasons, Nahnah rallied behind the consensus candidate, Bouteflika, and supported the state's reconciliation policies despite weathering criticism from his own camp.

Thanks to this participation-driven strategy, the MSP has joined several government coalitions.⁵⁴ The regime has rewarded the MSP with ministerial positions and parliamentary seats, hefty salaries and tax write-offs, and (above all) the opportunity to benefit from the redistribution of oil revenues. These benefits have created bonds of loyalty between the MSP and the regime. The government's capacity to absorb new political actors allows it to strengthen itself and portray itself nationally and internationally as an open and inclusive regime that allows Islamists to take part in state affairs.⁵⁵

But the MSP has paid a heavy price for this approach. While the party became an influential player on the Algerian political scene, the co-optation that sets the terms of its participation has disappointed its voters. Today, far from being the opposition force that pro-FIS voters and other would-be supporters once saw, many see the MSP as a tool of the regime. The party is technically part of the opposition, but it is neither a hard-liner nor a confrontational actor. Any occasional criticism it directs against the government is a continuous attempt to preserve its frail capacity to mobilize its base against the regime. It would be highly difficult for the MSP, which has been working with those in power since 1995, to renounce its privileges and benefits. The party is now tied so closely to the regime that the prospect of becoming a serious challenger or counterweight to the ruling authorities is virtually futile.

Algeria's Islamist politicians are far removed from the heyday of leading charismatic figures like Belhadj and Madani in their prime, who were able to rally millions of citizens to their cause. Since then, unable to shed their disagreements and conflicts of interest, the country's Islamist parties have continually failed to unite and clearly formulate ambitious reforms that would improve the daily lives of Algerians. Instead, by replicating the dysfunctions and shortcomings of the regime, Islamist parties have found themselves discredited and bereft of enthusiastic support.

The 2019 demonstrations marked another missed opportunity for the Islamists. Because they waited until the tide had already turned against Bouteflika to voice support for the protesters, the Islamist

politicians failed to win over the people. By joining the protest movement belatedly and opportunistically, Algeria's Islamist parties reinforced public perceptions that they put their own self-interest above the public interest. In fact, when leading figures such as Djaballah, Makri, and Soltani took to the street, not a few people decried them as sycophants and lackeys of the regime.⁵⁶

Grassroots Political Islam Makes Inroads

The failure of mainstream political Islam and jihadism in Algeria, as well as the benevolence of the state, has offered a grassroots Salafi network the opportunity to grow and expand: the Dawa Salafiya. The movement tactically has repositioned itself in religious terms as an alternative to jihadi Salafism, and in political terms as an alternative to political Salafism. As such, followers of the Dawa Salafiya movement claim to be against jihadists who breed *fitna* (conflict) and against moderates who propagate *bid'aa* (religious innovations).⁵⁷ They claim to maintain strict silence on political matters, which they leave to *Wali el Amr* (the Legal Guardian) to whom they pay unquestioning obedience.

The Algerian government has largely left the Dawa Salafiya alone because the movement's quietism allows the state to fulfill many important objectives: rallying support for its reconciliation policy, weakening the mainstream Islamist opposition, countering more violent and ultraorthodox forms of political Islam (including Salafi-jihadi ideologies), reinforcing its own authority, and broadening its support base by integrating (and keeping in check) the country's new Islamist bourgeoisie.

Since the protests against Bouteflika began in February 2019, the voices of the most famous leaders of the Dawa movement have remained silent. While it is true that there have been Islamist party leaders and imams in the streets supporting the movement, none of these figures have issued any declarations claiming to be representative of the Dawa movement writ large. At this stage, it is very hard to predict what the Dawa leaders will do. It is likely that they will continue to remain entirely silent in the transition phase to avoid upsetting the authorities and especially the military. The group's growing significance remains important.

The Saudi Connection

It is commonly believed that the roots of Dawa Salafiya in Algeria go back to the reformist movement of Ben Badis and Mubarak El-Mili in the 1920s. But the movement in its current form dates back to the 1980s, when a group of Algerian scholars came back from Saudi Arabia after studying at the Islamic University of Madinah, a Salafi stronghold. The Dawa movement is Wahhabi-inspired. The Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia is the source of much of the Wahhabi thought that has flooded the Arab world in general and Algeria in particular. The Algerian shuyukh affiliated with the Dawa have been taught or influenced by Saudi scholars such as Sheikh

Abd al-Aziz Ibn Bâz, Muhammad Nasir-ud-Dîn al-Albani, Ibn al Rahman al Uthaymeen, Saleh al-Fawzan, and Rabee al-Madkhali, who have strong links with the official religious institution Dar el Ifta in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi educational support has been a vital factor in the growth and expansion of the Dawa. Many Algerian students for whom established Salafi professors vouch are offered trips to Saudi Arabia supposedly to perform the pilgrimage while in reality they go to study Salafism. Sponsorship by a professor from the movement allows students to obtain a stipend and a certificate at the end of the course. After that, these newly minted graduates become authorities and can vouch for others to take the trip. Such sponsorship arrangements and the power given by the Saudis can be removed at any time. To stay up to date on the needs of the Dawa Salafiya, the Saudi embassy in Algeria used to offer honorariums to Algerian students who wrote reports on the evolution of the community and its relationship to society.⁵⁸

The educational materials offered by the Saudis have been an essential element in spreading the ideas of the Dawa. Most of the books coming from Saudi Arabia are either distributed for free or generate revenues that are reinvested in the movement. Algerian authorities have been trying to oversee the market of religious books, but their control is not absolute.⁵⁹ Every year, dozens of forbidden religious books, pamphlets, leaflets, and compact discs (mainly from Saudi Arabia) find their way into the country and end up on store shelves despite the government's interdiction efforts.⁶⁰ These books are easy to read and offer simple religious guidance without delving into ideological issues, making them accessible to and popular with various segments of Algerian society.⁶¹

Thanks to this Saudi backing, the Dawa movement has developed an extensive network of followers led by figures who actively preach from Algiers to the edges of the Algerian Sahara. For instance, Sheikh Mohamed Ferkous, who was appointed symbolically in a letter sent by Saudi Sheikh al-Madkhali as the official voice of Salafism in Algeria, is very active in Algiers and its suburbs.⁶² Other notable figures include Sheikh Abdelmadjid Djemaa, Lazhar Snigra, and Azeddine Ramadhani.⁶³ Many of these shuyukh are accessible to all comers via social media and sometimes even freely share their phone numbers. Their fatwas are available online, and they offer guidance on several everyday matters and in several languages, including Arabic, French, and even English.

The Dawa Movement and Re-Islamization in Algeria

For many ordinary Algerians, the Dawa movement offers an alternative solution to a long-brewing crisis of political representation.⁶⁴ Dawa Salafiya's quietist approach has attracted many members of the generation that grew up during the dark years of the civil war. Many Algerians have been charmed by the movement's calls to reject the Westernization of Algerian society without confronting the country's authorities. Dawa Salafiya speaks to a generation of Algerians who are

disappointed with a political scene that has been monopolized by the FLN since 1962, disenchanted with radical Islamists and their track record of violent extremism during the civil war, and let down by moderate Islamist politicians, who have long been little more than tools for those in power.

Dawa provides its supporters with a network, a sense of hope, and above all a place in society. Through its extensive community and its moral code, the Dawa offers its followers a chance to overcome political exclusion, restore social bonds, and create a positive self-image. Dawa also attracts middle-class Algerians, many of whom are traditionally conservative and pious, and among whom social and cultural conservatism has generally resonated. The revolutionary jihadi approach is not a possibility for these populations as it threatens their social and economic status. The Dawa movement's subculture and social connections are a way for these individuals to symbolically oppose the state. Dawa provides a collective identity and source of solidarity that gives its followers meaning and the strength to resist modernism.⁶⁵

In addition, in a country where the state suffers from poor governance, a burdensome bureaucracy, deep corruption, underdelivering institutions, and a lack of tangible public representation (even at the local level), Dawa is an extensive network that can provide its followers with an alternative system of social organization modeled on a so-called ideal Islamic society. With their religious proselytism through an array of mediums and channels, Dawa has become the leading force of re-Islamization in Algerian society.⁶⁶ Its ideology has spread, its influence has grown, and its networks have expanded.

As a result, Dawa's organizational strength in certain areas is strong and vibrant. In Algiers, the Salafists are very active, and in places such as Hydra, Kouba, Bouzaréah, Birkhadem, Bordj el Kiffan, and Draria, they have managed to take over several mosques by lobbying and pushing out imams who are not followers of the movement. Certain mosques are well-known for being under Salafi control, such as Lazhar Mosque in Les Pins Maritimes, the mosque of Ain Naadja, and that of Bab Ezzouar in the city of Douzi.⁶⁷ Allegiance to the same mosque is the basis of relationships between followers of the movement. Oftentimes, friendships start in the mosque, in closed studying groups, or even online. The movement's members, according to its followers, help one another get married, find jobs, find housing, or locate suitable schools for their children.

Education is of paramount importance to the Dawa, which has adopted the teachings of Sheikh al-Albani centered on the concept of *al tasfiya was al tarbiya* (purification and education). Purification consists of removing all corrupted beliefs and ideas of polytheism that have entered the lives of Muslims as well as purifying the Sunna and the law from the various innovations that have contaminated it. The second step is the education of oneself and then the education of others.⁶⁸ It is with this understanding that the Dawa invests in Islamic schools and kindergartens to educate future generations about Salafism. Institutions such as the Saudi Arabian School in Algiers, Al Manahil and Les Jardins du Savoir in Draria, and Alouka in Bab Ezzouar are all Salafi schools that are highly

regarded by members of the community.⁶⁹ In these institutions, coeducation between boys and girls is not allowed, the teaching of the Quran every morning is mandatory, and group prayer is compulsory for all pupils.

Similarly, some of the country's largest and most influential universities, such as the Émir Abdelkader University of Constantine and the Islamic Sciences Faculty of Kharouba, are under Dawa control. In Kharouba, the majority of students are followers of Dawa Salafiya and are taught by professors who do not follow the official curricula but instead teach according to their Salafi agenda. Both professors and students promote what they consider to be good Salafi behavior, dress, and discourse. Professors and students who fail to follow the path of Dawa are isolated and treated with caution or even dismissed.⁷⁰ Even the scientific council of the university has been infiltrated and is dominated by Salafists. The followers of the Dawa have a mass outreach apparatus through their proselytizing activities that goes beyond the university campus; many elders are well-known for organizing classes in their homes. Others play a role of guardians to the students by doing things like helping them get married, guiding them as they make major life decisions, and seeking to purify them from what they see as ruinous beliefs and all forms of corruption and disbelief. To this end, they prevent them from reading newspapers and magazines or even watching television.

Besides their spiritual endeavors, a majority of Dawa followers are involved in business and commercial networks. The aid and assistance granted by the government—in the framework of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation—have allowed some Algerians to develop commercial enterprises. Many of them speak fluent French, which facilitates their connections with other Salafists in France. The majority of these contacts are French individuals with Algerian origins who want to perform their *hijra* (migration to Islamic lands) and live in their native land.⁷¹ The development of this network has helped the Algerian Salafi business community import and export a variety of goods, including books, clothing, bedding, and furniture. The shuyukh of the Dawa regularly issues fatwas to help the followers in their business enterprises. Sheikh Ferkous, for instance, issued a fatwa permitting bribes for customs agents for the sake of a business; he explained that when obligated to do so, the person who gives the bribe escapes judgment because the sinner is not the giver but rather the receiver of the bribe.⁷²

These various activities centered on the goals of purification and education should be taken seriously. Cognizant that neither the moderate Islamists nor the jihadists has been able to gain political traction or achieve progress toward establishing an Islamic government, the Dawa has followed a low-key tactical playbook. While these activities have helped the Dawa develop and expand on the ground, perhaps the most critical factor has been the camouflage that a quietist approach has furnished. Supporting and respecting incumbent political rulers is a strategic move for the Dawa. By doing so, they give the impression that they are Islamists who are not interested in the state and the politicization of Islam. Yet their quietism does not mean that they do not engage with political

developments. Members of the Dawa influence political events indirectly while observing their ideological principle of refraining from direct political participation.

During the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, for example, the leaders of the Dawa movement called Algerians not to join the wave of protests against their leaders and condemned both Islamist parties and jihadists alike. Similarly, in 2014, Dawa leaders called Algerians to perform their civic duty and unite behind then president Bouteflika. But, despite this support for incumbent leaders, the Dawa movement does not hesitate to state, like the radical FIS in the 1990s, that democracy itself is *shirk* (the sin of practicing idolatry or polytheism). Sheikh Ferkous has explained that “strikes, sit-ins, and demonstrations, as well as all the methods inherent in democracy, are part of the habits of the disbelievers and the methods by which they behave with their governments.”⁷³ Yet he also repeatedly has called Algerian citizens not to rebel against their rulers, rulers that are the fruit of this same supposedly impious system. This is how Dawa Salafiya, despite considering democracy to be a manifestation of *shirk*, tries to remain in the good graces of the authorities to have latitude to advance its leading role in the re-Islamization of Algerian society.

Given the political implications of the Dawa’s ostensibly apolitical re-Islamization efforts, influential voices within the regime have raised concerns. Indeed, Minister of Religious Affairs Mohamed Aïssa has repeatedly noted the worrying rise of the Dawa Salafiya and the potential radicalism of its ideas. In 2015, for instance, some Dawa followers launched a poster campaign in the streets of the capital inciting Algerians not to celebrate the Mawlid Nabawi Sharif (the birth of the prophet). Aïssa denounced this campaign and called on Algerians to celebrate the holiday as usual.⁷⁴ Similarly, in March 2018, Aïssa denounced an excommunication fatwa launched by Sheikh Ferkous against the Ibadites, the Sufis, and the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷⁵ A few months later, in June 2018, worried about the rise of Salafi thought in the country’s mosques, Aïssa decided to freeze the renewal of “mosque committees” that the Dawa infiltrated to push for the appointment of their own imams.⁷⁶

On the whole, the latest developments in Algeria seem to indicate that the Dawa will maintain its quietist, mostly nonconfrontational tactics. Since the protests against Bouteflika began in February 2019, the Dawa movement’s leaders have remained silent. Despite the large-scale demonstrations that pressed Bouteflika to step down, the leaders of the Dawa movement maintained their stance of not rebelling against the regime and the political system. It is likely that the movement will continue to eschew politics and focus on its religious activities.

At the same time, the Dawa Salafiya is integrating political observations into its religious instructions, which shows that politics directly affects spiritual life on some level. The movement is controlling the religious observance and faith of millions of Algerians in the face of change. Through these activities and its quietist stance, the Dawa is, on the one hand, avoiding the wrath of the authorities and, on the other hand, is putting in place the foundations and the pillars for building an Islamic society

according to its Salafi standards. As al-Albani once put it: “Build an Islamic State in your hearts, it shall be built for you on your lands.”⁷⁷

Conclusion

As Algeria’s post-Bouteflika leadership saga unfolds, the country’s military-backed leaders are likely to continue to overwhelmingly shape the terms and direction of the nation’s politics. Yet the country’s various Islamist communities still offer an important vantage point into the character of the society they are presiding over. Despite sporadic and highly localized jihadi violence, radical Islamism no longer represents a viable or desirable pathway for most Algerians. And while moderate Islamist parties will likely continue to be political actors in the transition, they will be hamstrung by the general public’s perception that they are lackeys of the regime. Meanwhile the Dawa will continue to exploit ostensibly nonpolitical corners of society in pursuit of a re-Islamization agenda that seeks to reshape Algerians’ social and religious identities and build solidarity on a foundation of everyday practices that have highly political implications.

In short, political Islam is not dead in Algeria and will continue to be an important feature of the country’s public life as the shifting lives of ordinary citizens play out amid an uncertain political terrain.

About the Author

Dalia Ghanem is a resident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, where her work examines political and extremist violence, radicalization, Islamism, and jihadism with an emphasis on Algeria.

Notes

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- ² Several interviewees mentioned this fear of “hijacking” during the author’s fieldwork in Algiers from February 22 until March 31, 2019.
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- ¹⁰ Shuyukh is the plural form of the term sheikh.
- ¹¹ Jacob Olidort, “The Politics of ‘Quietist’ Salafism,” Brookings Institution, Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World no. 18, February 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper_Jacob-Olidort-Inside_Final_Web.pdf.
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- ¹³ Ulrike Mengedoht, “La politique d’arabisation de l’Algérie et ses conséquences sur l’islamisme” [The Arabization policy and its consequences for Islamism] in *Algérie, France, Islam* [Algeria, France, Islam], ed. Joseph Jurt, (Paris: l’Harmattan, 1997), 84.
- ¹⁴ The Islamist movement was composed of four factions: 1) the jazirists, who were young, well-educated, scientifically minded, francophone Algerians who claimed to represent the supposed Algerian distinctiveness of the movement; 2) the current of Mahfoud Nahnah who was ideologically close to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which financed an organization Nahnah ran called al-Irshad wa-l-Islah; and 3) purportedly independent imams who preached in mosques that lacked official state recognition.
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- ²⁴ Hassan Zerrouky, “*La nébuleuse islamiste en France et en Algérie*” [The Islamist nebula in France and Algeria], (France: Éditions 1, 2002).
- ²⁵ Fatiha Talahite, “Économie administrée, corruption et engrenage de la violence en Algérie” [Administrated economy: corruption and the circle of violence], *Tiers-Monde* 41, no. 161, 2000, 62.
- ²⁶ “M. Sifi devant le CNT. L’exposé en quelques chiffres” [M. Sifi in front of the CNT: a presentation in a few figures], *Algérie-Actualité*, January 16, 1995, no. 1526, 5.
- ²⁷ Luis Martinez, *La guerre civile en Algérie* [The Algerian civil war], (Paris: Karthala, 1998), 275.
- ²⁸ Karil Abdelmoumene, “Terrain défriché . . . en attendant le boom” [Land clearing . . . waiting for the boom], *Algérie-Actualité*, June 27, 1995, no. 1550, 9.
- ²⁹ “Habitat: 160 000 logements en 1995?” [Housing: 160,000 units for 1995?], *Algérie-Actualité*, no. 1541, (April 25, 1995), 7.
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Emir Bechir Street, Lazarieh Tower | Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061 | Riad El Solh, Lebanon
P: + 961 1 99 15 91

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