Islam(s) and politics: post-traumatic states in Algeria


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About the author

The zawiya of Sidi Marouf is discreetly set back from the road behind a screen of trees, and its high exterior walls present a sober and unadorned façade (a zawiya is a Sufi centre combining a mosque with teaching institution, students' and pilgrims' accommodation, and charitable activity; often - though not in this case - it is centred on the tomb of a founding saint.) Once inside, however, the place is spectacular in every sense of the word. The stucco, tile and calligraphy of the mosque's interior recall the famous religious schools of Fez, and the light, filtered through high-set coloured glass windows, has both the brilliance and the serenity suited to a place devoted to the study and celebration of the mystical elements of Islam.

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Most spectacular of all are the lines of white-clad students joined in the exalting discipline of the dhikr (the liturgical chanting of a text, formulaic phrases or single words - e.g. the names of God - as a spiritual discipline, sometimes inducing an ecstatic/trance-like state.) The rhythmic, focused breathing of hundreds of voices evoking the "He" of God resonates as if with the frequency of the building around the immense interior of the cupola, the central dome that the mosque's architects modelled on that of the Mosque of the Prophet, where Mohammed [14] is buried, in Medina.

The study and practice of Sufism, based in the zawiyas of the various orders, or brotherhoods (in Arabic turq, singular tariqa) never quite disappeared from Algeria, although other, more rationalist and "puritanical" strains of Islamic thinking put it under severe pressure [15] during the first half of the 20th century; and for the more radically politicised Islamism of the past several decades, it had no legitimate place in Islam at all (see Michael Willis, The Islamic Challenge in Algeria [16] [Ithaca, 1996]).

For Bashir (not his real name; all names in this article have been changed), discovering religion and its capacity for social and political reform in the 1980s, in circles influenced by the Iranian revolution, the Egyptian [17] Muslim Brotherhood, and the Wahhabi doctrines [18] of Saudi Arabia, Sufi expressions and institutions of Islam were simply "heresy". Today, close to turning 40 and profoundly affected by the tragedies his country has since experienced, he still finds Sufism, its ecstatic practices and transcendental states of consciousness, difficult to reconcile with his scientific and professional education (see J Spencer Tringham, The Sufi Orders in Islam [Oxford University Press, 2006].)
A trail of disenchantment

If religious observance and personal piety - in several competing forms of Islam - are more popularly deep-rooted and widespread than ever in Algeria, popular participation and interest in the country's politics has never been at a lower ebb. The social energies liberated in the crisis of the state at the end of the 1980s, and which gave rise to political mobilisations in a multiplicity of possible directions, were thoroughly exhausted by the war [21] that followed in the 1990s (see William B Quandt, Between Ballots and Bullets: Algeria's Transition from Authoritarianism [22] [Brookings, 1998]).

The official turnout of 35.65% in the legislative election on 17 May 2007 [23] was a record low (down from the previous record of 46 % in 2002). The overwhelming sense of public disinterest, disenchantment and/or disgust with all things political is a stark indication of the breadth of the chasm separating Algeria's people from the political system governing their country. Politicians were themselves obliged to observe as much after the non-event of the polls (which were ignored, on the day, in favour of Algerian football club ES Setif's [24] 2-1 aggregate victory over Jordan's Faysali in the Arab Champions' League [25] final in Amman). It was a near-ubiquitous sense of disenfranchisement - of the irrelevance of the vote both to the realities of state power and policy and to everyday social concerns and needs - rather than calls for boycott by opposition figures and spokesmen for al-Qaida that kept people away from polling-booths [26].

A cry for attention

This does not mean that Islamism has disappeared from Algeria. Social and moral conservatism, desires for social "remoralisation", and sympathy for al-Qaida's apocalyptic efforts at bringing about a global confrontation of Good against Evil for the achievement of a truly Islamic order, are certainly to be found in Algeria as elsewhere. But beyond the Islamist currents incorporated into political parties and represented within the system - and which, in or out of government, have no more real relevance than their avowedly secularist, socialist, or Trotskyite opposite numbers - Algerian Islamism as a socially-grounded, oppositional political movement has lost whatever serious, programmatic content it ever really possessed.

(The Movement for National Renewal [MRN] or Islah' [Reform] Movement was founded in 1999 and led, until his eviction from its leadership in early 2007, by Abdallah Djaballah, as a breakaway from the Nahda [Renaissance] party, also founded by Djaballah in 1990. Both have been in opposition. The MSP / Harakat mujtama' al-silm [Movement of Society for Peace], formerly Haraka li-mujtama' islami [Movement for an Islamic Society], is a coalition partner within the "Presidential Alliance" whose senior member is the National Liberation Front [FLN]. The FLN also has significant Islamist-leaning personalities, including the party's secretary-general and current prime minister, Abdelaziz Belkhadem [28].)

An armed insurgency has kept up a sporadic state of insecurity in some parts of the country since the effective ending of the war by the series of amnesties and agreements brokered since 1999 (especially the civil-concord law [29] of that year; on this, see The Civil Concord: A Peace Initiative Wasted [International Crisis Group, July 2001] [30]. But it has long since lost the political perspective with which it began in 1992; then, the suspension of elections sent Islamist radicals into the maquis with a view to bringing down the state by force of arms [31] - or at least regaining what they had imagined should be their position in it after the spectacular victory of the Front islamique du Salut (Islamic Salvation Front / FIS [32]) in the municipal and first-round legislative polls of 1990 and 1991 (FIS was banned in 1992).

Those aiming at the more modest goal of a seat in the system have since had every opportunity to
be reincorporated into the division of privilege. Anyone seriously intent on Islamist revolution has either long since given up, turning to more lucrative pursuits in more or less legitimate commerce, or else has replaced the political goals of change in this world for an Osama-bin-Laden-inspired vision of hastening in the next (see Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* [33] [C Hurst, 2005]).

The recent string of attacks, beginning with two car bombs in Algiers's suburbs in October 2006 and culminating in the coordinated blasts that hit the capital on 11 April 2007, indicate that the conditions for a more serious upturn of violence in the country are still present. But along with the rebranding [34] in January 2007 of Algeria's main remaining Islamist guerrilla organisation, the *Groupe salafiste pour la predication et le combat* (Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat / GSPC [34]) as "al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb", they most likely primarily suggest a certain desperation for attention and recognition in a country traumatised by war and withdrawn from politics, and a region whose other crises and catastrophes have pushed those of Algeria out of the spotlight.

A question of dignity

Moreover, "political Islam" can mean several different things in today's Algeria. Just as some members of the generation that, having in their youth embraced the cause of a radically politicised Islam, now turn to a Sufism they previously fought as "heresy" for their own spiritual needs, for an alternative vision of Islamic community or a recovery from the traumas wrought by the last decade's conflicts, so spokesmen for Sufism have themselves discovered the possibilities of a certain political participation. "Thousands of people turn up whenever we organise a meeting" claims Abdelkrim, himself an erudite Sufi disciple and proponent of closer ties between the *zawiyas* and the state; "If we had really serious funding, the other side [meaning salafi Islamists] would soon be the minority."

The recovery of a certain legitimacy for Sufism after its long marginalisation by official doctrine and state-sponsored culture has meant a return to respectability for practices and ideas that certainly have a real religious and cultural content: the *hadra* of the students at the *zawiya* of Sidi Marouf is evidently an experience as real as it is esoteric. At the same time, the orders' overt investment in the state, and the state's ostentatious investment in the *zawiyas* - the magnificent mosque of Sidi Marouf, where local dignitaries attend Friday prayer, is widely recognised as the creation of well-connected munificence - also creates suspicion, hostility, or distaste towards *les zawaya du pouvoir* ("the *zawiyas* of the ruling power").

Much of Algerian society is deeply attached to the dignity of its religion, and as deeply distrustful of *le pouvoir*, the ruling system, as it is effectively divorced from the nominal sovereignty of the "popular and democratic" republic. To many Algerians, the official patronage recently accorded the *zawiyas*, like President Abdulaziz Bouteflika's [35] project for a new and record-breaking monumentally Grand Mosque on the Algiers waterfront, is at best wasteful clientilist largesse, at worst an affront to the dignity of both religion and politics (the mosque is planned to be the second or third largest mosque in the world, with a minaret over 300m high and space for 120,000 people. The Canadian engineering firm Dessau-Soprin was awarded the contract [36] in April 2007).

A politics of survival

Bouteflika, three years into his second term and beset by persistent reports of uncertainty over his state of health, has made the achievement of *grand projets* the keynote of his presidency, seeking to cement his image as rebuilder of the nation in both politics and infrastructure: an officially war-ending law on "national reconciliation", a much-touted reform of the constitution, Algiers's new international airport, a new motorway crossing the breadth of the country, even the immense 1980s white elephant of Algiers's metro. Full coffers of hydrocarbon revenues have backed the purchase of acquiescence, and a measure of social *peace* [37], with accomplishments [38] even bigger than the finest of prayer-halls. But the consensus of "reconciliation" is hard to find on the ground among the unhealed wounds of the war, the unresolved social and economic pressures and the corrosive unaccountability of the system that engendered the country's crisis two decades ago (see Abderrahmane Moussaoui, *De la violence en Algérie: Les lois du chaos* [Actes Sud, 2006 [39]])

The state, having proved sufficiently resilient and ruthless to withstand the experience and the
exercise of the 1990s' traumatic violence, now appears to offer little perspective beyond an addiction to the status quo. As for society, Bashir remarks that in the wake of the war and its non-resolution, "mosques have never been so full, nor hearts so empty".

Also in openDemocracy on politics and faith in Algeria:

Gilles Kepel, "Tightrope walks and chessboards: an interview" (14 April 2003 [40])

Eric Goldstein, "Algeria's amnesia decree" (10 April 2006 [41])

Hanny Megally & Veerle Opgenhaffen, "Algeria's past needs opening, not closing" (28 September 2005 [42])

Kanishk Tharoor, "Democracy crumbling in Algeria?" (19 April 2007 [43])

A turn in the road

Hadj Ahmad is another, much older, man with a longer history of political activism and religious learning. The son of a distinguished Islamic scholar who was noted for his modernist, reformist teaching, but also for his refusal to engage in polemical attacks on the zawiyas, in the first decades of the 20th century, Hadj Ahmad was a nationalist militant imprisoned and tortured by the French during the war of independence in the 1950s.

With a quiet, dignified air of piety as well as a mischievous smile and a remarkable lack of rancour towards the way his country's history has turned out, he now spends much time in discussion with young people, especially students: "We have to try to save this country", he says, and his meaning is social, political, and religious all at once. "And it's possible... But what I say, what I insist on above all, is to avoid violence... I insist on that, never to accept violence. It doesn't pay, and it can't, for Algeria... People of knowledge, people of science, are well enough armed with that to avoid the recourse to violence."

In the aftermath of the ruinous violence that gripped the country in the last decade, Algerians both individually and collectively are weary of religious radicalism and wary of political promises. No one doubts that the zawiyas, too, have their political uses and abuses, but the revived appeal of a mystical Islam derives from its avoidance of both as much as from the material benefits its patronage can bring; as well as from its potential to treat the traumatic recent past while also, perhaps, "arming", in a different sense to that practised a decade ago, for an uncertain near future.