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NORTH AFRICAN ISLAMISM IN THE BLINDING LIGHT OF 9-11

Hugh Roberts
Development Research Centre
LSE

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Hugh Roberts

Development Research Centre, LSE

“D’une manière générale, l’homme post-almohadien, sous quelque aspect qu’il subsiste – pacha, faux « alem », faux intellectuel ou mendiant – est la donnée essentielle de tous les problèmes du monde musulman depuis le déclin de sa civilisation.”

Malek Bennabi, *Vocation de l’Islam* (1954)

Today, the Muslim world is passing through a crisis of its history wherein it finds itself faced, at every step, with the same dilemma. The dogmatic attitude is not merely harmful in economic or a hygienic terms; dogmatism itself creates, in general, a hostile attitude towards Islam. Today Algeria is witnessing a sort of struggle between bigotry that pretends to represent Islam and atheism that claims to represent progress.

Malek Bennabi, *The Algerian Perspectives* (1964)

Introduction

In the wake of the appalling attacks on the World Trade Center, an influential tendency among Western commentators sought to outlaw attempts to explain the behaviour of the prime suspect, Osama Bin Laden’s *Al-Qa’eda* organisation, as indecent as well as unnecessary. The attacks were not only evil in themselves but the work of Evil with a capital ‘E’, and no thought might legitimately be given to the matter of what motivated them. A formally distinct trend of Western opinion, that of a supposedly ‘leftwing’ minority personified by *Vanity Fair*’s columnist Christopher Hitchens, suggested that these attacks were the work of ‘Islamofascism’, and that, this being the case, it equally rendered attempts at explanation outrageous as well as redundant.¹

The author of this paper does not approach the business of understanding the world we live in on the assumption that the Devil is a force in international affairs. And since the concept of ‘fascism’ has, outside the realm of specialist research on 20th century European (and mainly Italian) history, been emptied of most analytical content in contemporary leftwing discourse, and its deployment almost certainly has the purpose as well as the observable effect of stunning the mind and inhibiting debate and enquiry, it can most realistically be understood as no more than a secular variant of the postulate that the Devil is abroad.

A major implication of these theses was their disqualification and discounting of the argument that the attacks were in some way a reaction to the behaviour of the US government in the world at large and in the Arabo-Islamic world in particular. Leaving aside the wilder, more thoughtless and indeed callous forms in which this was sometimes couched, the main thrust of this argument was that American policy and official behaviour in many parts of the world had long been creating deep feelings of resentment and grievance in significant elements of the populations of numerous countries, and that violent reactions were to be expected sooner or later, and broadly understandable when they actually materialized.

¹ Christopher Hitchens, ‘Against rationalization’, *The Nation*, 8 October 2001 (but posted on-line 20 September 2001), and ‘On Sin, the Left and Islamic Fascism’, *The Nation* (on-line), 24 September 2001.

A sophisticated and largely unpolemical version of this argument was put forward before 11 September 2001 by the distinguished American scholar, Chalmers Johnson, in his book *Blowback*,² but since this dealt exclusively with US policy and behaviour in East and South East Asia (China, Japan, Korea plus Indonesia.), its argument did not provide specific guidance for attempts to understand '9-11' on the assumption that Al-Qa'eda was indeed responsible for the attacks. It is here that the arguments of another distinguished American scholar, Noam Chomsky, have appeared to be most relevant (arguments endorsed and recycled by other commentators, especially numerous in the Middle East itself), namely that it has been US behaviour in the region, notably its support for Israel, its treatment of Iraq, and its maintenance of military bases in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, which in their combination furnish the key to understanding the terrorists' motives and explaining their actions.³

The problem which I have with Chomsky's argument is a quite particular one. It is not that his explanation of the possible motivation for '9-11' amounts to a justification of the attacks, as some of his detractors have quite mistakenly charged; to explain events or actions is not in the least to justify them, and Chomsky has condemned the attacks very unequivocally. Moreover, I do not doubt that his explanation is substantially true as far as it goes. The evidence of general and profound bitterness in the Arab and Islamic world over US behaviour in the region is massive and easily available for all with eyes to see and ears to hear. In addition, I entirely agree with Chomsky that particular, identifiable, palpable – indeed blatant - aspects of the US government's behaviour furnish a far more convincing explanation of popular hostility to the U.S. in the region than the largely unsubstantiated claims that this is grounded in an atavistic hostility to Western culture and expresses an inevitable 'clash of civilizations' as suggested by Bernard Lewis,⁴ Samuel Huntingdon, *et al.*

The difficulty is not that Chomsky's explanation is untrue, but that it is true only as far as it goes, and does not go far enough. In placing all the emphasis on the behaviour of the US government, it tends to understate, if not deny, the extent to which certain elements of the populations of the Middle East and North Africa are also conscious and deliberate actors in the drama which is unfolding; it tends to comfort the widespread self-image of these populations as merely victims of American policy and to cast the behaviour of politically activist organisations and movements as merely re-actions to external initiatives, provocations and stimuli.

A major element of the argument of this paper is that the outlook and behaviour of Islamist movements in the region are not adequately explained by reference merely to American (or, more broadly, Western) actions and policies, and that the phenomenon of Islamist activism in both its non-violent as well as its violent variants is the product of the complex history of the region (especially since the first world war) as well as symptomatic of a profound problem in the ideological and political life of their societies, a problem which should not be reduced to that of American (or Western) behaviour. However, when stated in these very abstract terms, this argument admits of numerous variants, some of which I certainly do not endorse.

Much the most prominent variant since '9-11' has been the thesis that 'the problem' – far from being US (or Western, or Israeli, etc.) behaviour – is the particular ideological tradition from which Al-Qa'eda and Osama Bin Laden are derived, namely the religious tradition which emerged and has come to dominance in Sa'udi Arabia. It is the principal burden of this paper that this - the most widely touted and influential - version of an abstract position to which I myself adhere is

² Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback; the costs and consequences of American empire*, New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2000.

³ See his 'Reply to Hitchens' in *The Nation* (on-line), 1 October 2001, and Noam Chomsky, *9-11*, New York, Seven Stories Press, 2001.

⁴ Bernard Lewis, *What went wrong? The clash between Islam and modernity in the Middle East*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002.

profoundly wrong, and that an entirely different way of understanding the nature of the problem of contemporary Islamism is mandated by the historical evidence as well as badly needed by Western policy makers.

The Swamp To Be Drained: Wahhabism As The Source Of The Problem

As is well known, Osama Bin Laden is from Sa'udi Arabia, and his national identity is primarily founded on that fact, whether or not he continues to enjoy the benefits of Sa'udi Arabian nationality. In addition, 15 of the 19 hijackers are believed or at least alleged to have been Sa'udi nationals as well. An issue has accordingly been made of the responsibility of Sa'udi Arabia for the genesis of Al-Qa'eda and more broadly contemporary Islamist militancy, notably by Stephen Schwarz,⁵ Neil McFarquhar,⁶ Anatole Kaletsky,⁷ Jay Tolson,⁸ Michael Doran,⁹ Martin Indyk,¹⁰ Daniel Pipes¹¹ and Mark Steyn,¹² to name but some of the most prominent columnists and academics who have taken this line. The core of the argument has been the suggestion that the source of the problem is the particular tradition or tendency in Islam commonly known as Wahhabism, which originated in the heart of Arabia and achieved hegemony in Arabian Islam in conjunction with the political triumph of the House of Sa'ud. I shall consider this in a moment. But first I want to draw attention to the non-Sa'udi and non-Wahhabi aspect of Al-Qa'eda and contemporary Islamic activism.

The alleged leader of the five hijackers on American Airlines Flight 11 – indeed, of all 19 hijackers according to some accounts – was not a Sa'udi, but an Egyptian, Mohammed Atta. The man accused of being the 20th hijacker, Zakarias Moussaoui, is a French national of Moroccan parentage.¹³ Moreover, numerous Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians have been arrested over the last year and a half in various countries, including France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK and the USA, on charges linking them to Al-Qa'eda.¹⁴ In addition, Bin Laden's principal lieutenant is unanimously agreed to have been (and, presumably, still to be) Ayman Al-Zawâhiri, formerly the leader of the Egyptian Islamist organization known as *Al-Gihad*.¹⁵ And the military leader of *Al-*

⁵ Stephen Schwarz, 'Ground Zero and the Saudi connection', *The Spectator*, 22 September 2001.

⁶ Neil McFarquhar, 'Bin Laden adheres to austere form of Islam', *The New York Times*, 7 October 2001.

⁷ Anatole Kaletsky, 'Bush must not ignore the Saudi connection', *The Times*, 11 October 2001.

⁸ Jay Tolson, 'Struggle for Islam', *usnews.com*, 15 October 2001.

⁹ Michael Doran, 'Somebody else's civil war', *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2002, pp.22-42.

¹⁰ Martin Indyk, 'Back to the bazaar', *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2002, pp.75-88.

¹¹ Daniel Pipes, 'Sue the Saudis', *New York Post*, 18 February 2002.

¹² Mark Steyn, 'Down with Saudi Arabia', *The Spectator*, 9 March 2002.

¹³ See the article by his brother, Abd Samad Moussaoui, 'My brother Zac', *The Guardian*, 19 April 2003, and Abd Samad Moussaoui (with Florence Bouquillat), *Zacarias Moussaoui, the making of a terrorist* (translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods), London: Serpent's Tail, 2003.

¹⁴ BBC News: 'Strasbourg arrests "have Bin Laden link"', 10 November 2001; 'Spanish police hold Bin Laden suspects', 13 November 2001; 'Terror suspects remanded in Spain', 18 November 2001; 'Spain holds al-Qaeda finance suspects', 14 April 2002; 'Dramatic opening to "al-Qaeda" trial', 16 April 2002; *International Herald Tribune*. 'Terror groups recruit North Africans', 6 September 2002; *The Guardian*: 'Six held over shoe-bomb plot', 27 November 2002; 'Terror arrests sweep Europe', 25 January 2003; 'Four held after Manchester raids', 30 January 2003; 'Algerians were recruiting for al-Qaida, court told', 6 February 2003.

¹⁵ On Al-Zawâhiri, see Hamza Hendawi, 'Cairo brain surgeon viewed as brains of terror group', *Associated Press*, 21 September 2001; Richard Owen & Daniel McGrory, 'The man to really fear', *The Times*, 11 October 2001; Samir Rafaat, 'World's Second Most Wanted Man', *Egy.com People*, 1 November 2001; Lawrence Wright, 'The Man Behind Bin Laden', *The New Yorker*, 16 September 2002. A particularly interesting account is that of the Egyptian Islamist lawyer, Montasser Al-Zayyat, *Ayman Al-Zawâhiri ka-mâ arafatuhu* ['Ayman Al-Zawâhiri as I knew him'], 2nd edition, Cairo, May 2002; English translation, hardback edition: *The Road to Al-Qaeda: the story of Bin Laden's right hand man* (editor, Sara Nimis; Introduction by Ibrahim Abu Rabi; translated by Ahmed Fekry), London: Pluto Press, 2001.

Qa'eda until his death in Afghanistan in November 2001 was also an Egyptian, Sobhi Abu Sitta, more commonly known by his alias, Mohammed Atef.¹⁶

It is not the case that *Al-Qa'eda* is a simple or pure expression of the Wahhabi tradition of Islamic activism native to Sa'udi Arabia. Sa'udi nationals have not monopolised the leading roles, for the role of North Africans, especially but not only Egyptians, has been and remains extremely important. And the relationship of the perspectives which have oriented *Al-Qa'eda* to Sa'udi Wahhabism has not been a straightforward affair at all. Far from being a simple expression of Wahhabism, the attacks on '9-11' - assuming they were correctly attributed to *Al-Qa'eda* - were the product of a major and historic change, a fivefold reorientation of the most activist elements of Islamic radicalism in the Middle East and North Africa.

The first two aspects of this reorientation concerned the historic core of *Al-Qa'eda* itself, Bin Laden and his oldest and closest associates from the days of the Afghan war, the founders and leaders of the original organisation called *Al-Qa'eda* ('the Base') in the early 1980s. The first aspect was the reorientation of Bin Laden & Co. to anti-Americanism. It should not be forgotten that, in fighting the USSR-backed régime in Kabul, the *mujahidin* forces, including *Al-Qa'eda*, were closely allied with the USA; for *Al-Qa'eda* to take the USA as its primary adversary and target was to perform a 180-degree turn in its international outlook. The second aspect was their contracting of an alliance with the most extreme wing of Egyptian Islamism (the *Al-Gihad* group).

The third and fourth aspects of this re-orientation concerned this same, extreme, wing of Egyptian Islamism, namely Al-Zawâhiri and his associates in the *Al-Gihad* group, which similarly adopted a position of militant anti-Americanism and, more or less simultaneously, allied itself with the activist wing of Wahhabism by adhering to *Al-Qa'eda*.

Finally, once militant Wahhabi activism (Bin Laden & Co.) and Egyptian extremism (Al-Zawâhiri & Co.) were allied in a new campaign against America, the resulting synthesis – which is what commentators have been referring to since '9-11' when speaking of *Al-Qa'eda* in the present tense – involved a further re-orientation from guerrilla warfare to terrorism, with *Al-Qa'eda* adopting *Al-Gihad*'s handwriting – its tactics and techniques.¹⁷

It is important to appreciate that this alliance is something new, and was sealed only as recently as February 1998. Previously, Egyptian Islamism was not oriented to Wahhabism and Wahhabism was not allied to Egyptian Islamism. Moreover, for both partners to the alliance, their anti-Americanism is also new. Wahhabism had previously been preoccupied with other adversaries at home and abroad (rival traditions in Arabian Sunni Islam, Shi'ism, Pan-Arab nationalism, communism; the Ottoman empire, South Yemen until the unification of Yemen, the Soviet Union to c. 1989) and Egyptian Islamism had equally been preoccupied with other adversaries (the British, the liberal-constitutionalist tradition of the Wafd, the communists, Zionism, the Nasser and post-Nasser régimes, the Copts and the secularists). Although there has certainly been an anti-American strain in Egyptian Islamism in so far as this has vehicled a wide-ranging critique of Western materialism (notably in the work of Sayyid Qutb) in addition to hostility towards U.S. policy in the Middle East (notably U.S. support for Israel), the *jihadi* wing of Egyptian Islamism has not, until very recently,

¹⁶ Atef was reportedly the mastermind behind the bomb attacks on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es-Salaam in 1998. For an informed overview, see Khaled Dawoud, 'Mohammed Atef: Egyptian militant who rose to the top of the Al-Qaida hierarchy', *The Guardian*, 19 November 2001.

¹⁷ That these tactics and techniques did not originate in *Al-Gihad* is another matter; as others have pointed out, they are similar to those of various terrorist tendencies in European radicalism in the late 19th and early 20th century; see John Gray, *Al-Qa'eda and what it means to be modern*, London: Faber & Faber, 2003, pp.20-21; Fred Halliday, *Two Hours that Shook the World, September 11, causes and consequences*, London: Saqi Books, 2002, p.32.

taken the U.S. itself as an adversary to be targeted in attacks, concentrating instead on its confrontation with “the nearer enemy”, that is, the Egyptian state.

That there has been nothing self-evident about the involvement of Egyptian Islamists in Al-Qa‘eda in the last few years should prompt us to ask a further question about Islamism elsewhere in North Africa. What has been leading or pushing Islamist activists in the Maghrib (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia) into an alliance with disgruntled Wahhabis against America? It is often assumed that this orientation is natural and can be taken for granted. But this is quite mistaken. On the contrary, we should remember that:

- the traditional Western enemy for Moroccans, Tunisians and Algerians especially has been France, not the USA;
- that the rhetoric of the most dynamic Islamist movement in the Maghrib, the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut*, FIS), was never anti-American;
- that while Algerian veterans of the Afghan war have played leading roles in the armed movements in Algeria, not a single American has been among the numerous foreigners attacked, let alone the more than 100 foreigners killed, by these groups in Algeria since 1992;
- that the North African country with the most evident grounds for resentment and desire for revenge against Uncle Sam, Libya, appears not to be furnishing recruits to Al-Qa‘eda, at any rate not so far and not in any noticeable numbers.

So what has really been going on?

The answer to this question which I shall outline in the rest of this paper consists of three main theses:

- a thesis about what has happened in North African Islam over the last century;
- a thesis about radical Islamism in Sunni North Africa, and
- a thesis about the logic of the recent re-orientation of all and sundry.

The main implications of this answer will then be stated.

The Destructuring And Deregulating Of Contemporary Islam

A great deal of contemporary discussion of the rise of radical Islamism, or Islamic fundamentalism, or political Islam, or Islamic extremism (etc.) over the last two decades has tended to present this development as above all a response or reaction to the impact and challenge of the West on the one hand and to the disturbing effects but also the ultimate failure of nationalist politics on the other hand,¹⁸ the two being often linked in the thesis that nationalism has operated as a conduit for Westernisation (and not merely modernisation) in the societies in question.¹⁹ While there is clearly much truth in this view, it tends to overlook a major aspect of what has been happening in the societies of the Muslim world since the beginning of the colonial era, namely the development of massive and profound disorder in the Islamic religious field. Rather than try to present a historical analysis of the development of this disorder, for which there is no space here, I shall attempt to

¹⁸ This is the standard line, taken in only slightly variant forms by Bruno Etienne, *L'Islamisme Radical*, Paris: Hachette, 1987; Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: expansion et déclin de l'Islamisme*, Paris: Gallimard, 2000; and many others.

¹⁹ Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: medieval theology and modern politics*, New Haven and London: Yale University press, 1985, chapter 2: ‘Barbarity and nationalism’.

throw it into relief by first briefly sketching a general model or schema of the *status quo ante* in this respect, and then considering what has become of it.²⁰

Once upon a time in the East

Prior to the colonial era, which in the Arab world began for practical purposes with the French capture of Algiers in 1830, the Islamic religious field was structured and so ordered by a set of important distinctions.

First, the Islamic world - *Dar al-Islam* - was clearly distinct from the non-Islamic world - *Dar al-Harb*. Second, within *Dar al-Islam*, Sunni Islam was clearly distinct from Shi'i Islam and both were also clearly distinguished from other variants of Islam, notably Ibadism or Kharejism, not to mention derived sects such as the Isma'ilis, the Yazidis, etc.. Third, Sunni Islam itself was internally structured and ordered by:

- the formal differences between the four recognised rites or schools of law (*madāhib*, sing. *madhab*): Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki and Shafe'i;
- the informal dichotomy between the scripturalist Islam of the doctors of Islamic learning (the '*ulama*', sing. '*alim*', possessor of '*ilm*', knowledge, science) and the Gnostic or mystical Islam of the Sufi orders (the *turuq*, singular: *tarîqa*);
- the explicit and formal differences between the various Sufi orders, each associated with the veneration of a different historic holy man or 'saint' (*walî*, plural: *awliyâ*) and the practice of his particular teachings, and further differentiated by the details of ritual.

Fourth, Shi'i Islam was also structured and ordered by the different versions of Shi'ism.

Subsequently...

Most if not all of these structuring and ordering distinctions have been eroded or otherwise undermined over the last century.

First, the distinction between *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Harb* has been eroded by:

- the disappearance in the inferno of the 1st World War of the Ottoman empire as the institutional embodiment and guarantor of (the greater part of) *Dar al-Islam*;
- the development – which also began during the 1st world war – of large-scale migration of Muslims to non-Muslim states (Maghribis to France, Belgium, Italy and Spain but also the UK, Canada and the USA; Turks to Germany, etc.)
- the development of the division between Muslims and lapsed Muslims/secularists in Muslim countries, a division greatly accentuated in the social consciousness by the advent of the doctrine of the neo-*Jahiliyya* (see below), which makes Muslim (or 'formerly' Muslim) countries themselves integral parts of the *Dar al-Harb*.

Second, the distinction between Sunni and Shi'i Islam has been blurred by:

²⁰ Kepel devotes the second chapter of his recent book *Jihad* to a discussion of 'le champ religieux' but the rapid review which he provides under this head nowhere addresses the problem of disorder in the *religious* field, in part because he focuses on organisations and movements (some of which belong in the political field) rather than issues and problems, and in part because his discussion is essentially contemporary, rarely straying further back than the 1940s or at most the 1920s, whereas there can be no doubt that it is the first world war and its catastrophic repercussions that constituted the great watershed in the story of the transition from relative order to accumulating disorder in North African and Middle Eastern Islam (Kepel 2000).

- the tendency since 1979 for numerous Sunni Islamists to take an interest in and borrow from the Iranian model or its offshoots (such as Hizbullah in Lebanon);²¹
- the fact that since the Iranian revolution, the Shi'a are no longer necessarily 'the community of the oppressed' and that, as their relationship to state power has changed, there has been a degree of 'Sunnification' of Shi'i doctrine, at any rate in the thought of Khomeini.²²

Third, the distinctions internal to Sunni Islam have been eroding:

- The distinction between the four *madâhib* is breaking down or at least being superseded to some extent, as is shown by the identification of numerous Sunni Islamists of the Maliki or possibly Shafe'i and Hanafi rites with Hanbalism; there is evidence that Hanbalism, as the main source of doctrinal radicalism, has been winning converts from the other schools in an unprecedented manner.²³ More generally, the phenomenal development of mass communications has undoubtedly eroded the significance of affiliation to these schools as a marker of religious identity; previously, one more or less unthinkingly accepted that one was a Hanafi or a Maliki or whatever because everyone else one knew was the same and one's parents had been and there was no alternative within view or reach; to be a Muslim in Morocco was to be a Sunni of the Maliki rite, full stop; ditto for Algeria with the sole exceptions of elements of the old Ottoman élite, who were Hanafis, and the Ibadis of the Mزاب; the fact that everyone now – thanks to the mass media and the intensive comings and goings of people from all corners of the society – is switched on, *branché*, means that everyone is aware of the numerous alternative licit ways of being a Muslim; one has, or can without difficulty (if one wants to) get, access to literature produced by the different brands, and one can licitly move around and pick and choose.
- The dichotomy between scripturalist and non-scripturalist Islam has been largely overcome, relegated via compromises but above all eroded by the progress of mass education and basic literacy and social mobility.
- The differences between Sufi orders has dwindled to a merely superficial product differentiation; there was never much doctrinal significance to these differences to begin with, and whatever former political differences developed in the context of the Muslim response to colonialism (e.g. in 19th century Algeria, where some *turuq* collaborated with France while others led armed resistance) has now been forgotten or at any rate forgiven.²⁴

²¹ A leading intellectual light of the Algerian Islamist movement in the 1970s and early 1980s, Rachid Benaïssa, took a conspicuous interest in the new Islamic Republic, making extended visits to Iran; much later, one of the leaders of the extremist Armed Islamic Group (GIA), Cherif Gousmi, was also noted for his alleged Iranian sympathies and dubbed 'Gousmi l'Iranien'. In Jordan in 1980, numerous Sunni shopkeepers, an element of the constituency of the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brothers, expressed their admiration for the Iranian revolution by hanging portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini above their counters (observed in Amman, April-June 1980). See also Mehdi Mozaffari, 'Islamism in Algeria and Iran', in Abdel Salam Sidahmed and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds.), *Islamic Fundamentalism*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996, pp.229-247.

²² See Ernest Gellner, 'Waiting for Imam', in Gellner, E., *Culture, Identity and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. This is a controversial view; Olivier Roy has insisted on the ways in which the Islamic Republic in Iran remains very different from the models implied by Sunni doctrine. But Roy himself notes how profoundly Khomeini innovated within Shi'i political thought and has argued that "Khomeinism undermined the Shiite clerical system that had developed over the course of three centuries...[T]he end of the pre-eminence of the grand ayatollahs...means the end of a certain Shiism" (*The Failure of Political Islam*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1994, pp.179-180).

²³ See, for example, the article in the Algerian daily newspaper *El Watan*, 15 January 2002: 'Haut Conseil Islamique: Les imams face au salafisme', which reports that "le prosélytisme du rite wahhabite prend de l'ampleur dans la société algérienne pourtant profondément imprégnée du rite malékite". (There is no 'Wahhabi rite' as such, of course; the reference to this should be understood to mean the Hanbali rite, to which the Wahhabis belong.)

²⁴ Witness the recent rehabilitation of the previously collaborationist Tijaniyya order in Algeria; see the Algerian government daily *El Moudjahid*, 9 June 2001: 'À Laghouat, le Président de la République rencontre les membres de la confrérie Tidjania'; and 12 January 2002: 'Zaouia Tidjania...ou la voie de la spiritualité'; see also *El Watan*, June 11, 2001: 'Zaouia Tidjania, le tête-à-tête'.

This erosion of the old distinctions which structured and ordered the religious field has tended to lead to disorder, because it has undermined the intellectual and social authority of the special bodies of learned men – the *‘ulama* (sing. *‘alim*), ‘the men of leaning and authority’, but also the *foqaha* (jurists, sing. *fiqh*) – who personified the distinctions in question, several of which were also embodied in distinct bodies of learning, corpora of legal doctrine etc. with, at least in the old days, their respective networks of institutions – *kuttab*s (Qur’anic schools for young children), *madrasas* (schools, often linked to mosques, for older pupils) etc.. Thus disorder in the religious field has impacted immediately on the educational field, since the latter was until recently embedded in the former.

It is not only the political and moral authority of the *‘ulama* which has been challenged; their intellectual authority has been challenged as well, for their intellectual monopoly has disappeared. Not only has part of their store of special learning become irrelevant, and vast areas of entirely new special learning developed outside the sphere of faith, but even within the sphere of the faith nowadays all kinds of people can become what they fancy to be *du‘ah* (sing. *da‘i*), leaders of the proselytising mission of religious conversion (*da‘wa*), and consider they have acquired *‘ilm* (specialist knowledge, expertise) and the authority to issue *fatwas* (judicial opinions), etc. The consensus of the men of traditional learning and authority is no longer decisive or even relevant. Trends in mass public opinion repeatedly outflank the *‘ulama*, upstage them, steal their thunder and subordinate them to the apostles of the new ideological fashion.

The state of the contemporary Islamic religious field has thus turned out to be significantly different from that imagined by an influential theorist of contemporary Islam, the late Ernest Gellner, in his reflections on developments in Algerian and more generally North African Islam in the late 1970s and early 1980s.²⁵ Gellner’s assumption that the people’s religion of the saints and the tribes would go under and that the urban bourgeois *‘ulama* would definitively triumph has not been vindicated, for not only have the saints (*awliyâ*) and the *turuq* managed to survive²⁶ – indeed, the latter have made an impressive come-back – but, above all, the bourgeois *‘ulama* have been outflanked by new forces of radicalism. We are back – via the latest wave of radicalism – to (a literate or semi-literate version of) *vox dei, vox populi*.

Nowadays...

The erosion of the older *differentia specifica* which structured the religious field of Islam, and especially Sunni Islam, and which, by secreting special bodies of learned men to embody, cultivate and uphold these distinctions, ensured that order was maintained within this field, has meant that contemporary Islam now lacks its own long-established principles of internal differentiation and the traditional vocabulary to express these. It has accordingly become increasingly dependent upon classificatory systems derived either from the far distant past or from the West:

- the reversion to ancient 1st AH/7th CE century categories involves most notably the allusions to *al-jahiliyya* (the condition of pre-Islamic ignorance and barbarousness) itself and a set of concepts associate with this: *Hubal* (one of the deities worshipped in pre-Islamic Mecca, used generically to mean ‘idol’),²⁷ *taghut* (also idol, false god), *kuf*r, (unbelief, impiety),

²⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

²⁶ The Sufi orders in Egypt appear to have maintained themselves without difficulty, enjoying access to public space, notably outside the Sidna Hussein mosque in Hussein Square in Cairo, where a variety of *turuq* regularly perform their *dhikrs* in public, notably on the occasion of the *Mawlid*, the feast of the Prophet’s birthday, as I was able to observe on 12 May 2003. The continuing vitality of the popular cult of the saints in Egypt is attested by the local media: see “Walis prove as popular as ever with ‘ordinary folk’”, *The Egyptian Gazette*, 25 July 2002.

²⁷ Employed notably by the Algerian Islamists to refer to and condemn the huge monument, which now dominates the Algiers skyline, officially known as *Maqâm El-Chahid* (‘the Tomb of the Martyr’), erected by the Chadli regime in 1979-80 to commemorate the glorious dead of the war of national liberation.

kafir (infidel), etc., and above all to the sorting-sheep-from-goats dichotomy of the ‘sincere’ and the ‘hypocrites’ – *al-munafiqun*; these are the original categories of emergent Islam at its most primitive stage, before all other ordering distinctions had been developed; to resort to them is to resort to rudimentary constitutive classifications and to dispossess all the subsequent, more sophisticated, ordering and structuring classifications;

- the adoption or simple acceptance of Western categories includes the distinctions between ‘fundamentalists’ - translated by the Arabic neologism ‘*usuliyyun*’ - and the rest, ‘extremists’ – *al-mutatarrifun* - and the rest, ‘terrorists’ – *al-irhabiyyun* - and the rest, ‘radicals’ and ‘moderates’ and between ‘reformers and conservatives’.

There are numerous problems with this state of affairs, but let us concentrate here on two of them. The first is that these categorical distinctions do not amount to ordering principles in the sense of principles which permit the regulation of the Islamic religious field. One reason for this is that the employment of these categories is largely independent of objective criteria. In the old days, one could without question or argument ascertain whether a man was a Sunni or a Shi‘i, a Maliki or a Hanafi, a member of this *tarîqa* or that, a *sharîf* (member of a noble family claiming descent from the Prophet) or not, or even (in most cases) an ‘*alîm*’ or not. Now all is unclear, uncertain: what are the objective criteria for determining whether someone is sincere or a hypocrite? A radical or a moderate? A reformer or a conservative? An ‘*alîm*’ or a presumptuous but in fact ignorant buffoon or *poseur*? To an unprecedented extent, the application of distinguishing categories, including traditional ones (‘*alîm*, *da‘î*’) has become very largely if not entirely subjective.

The second difficulty is that this state of affairs makes profoundly problematical the development of law-bound government in the contemporary Sunni Muslim world. That is, it tends to preclude the development which is fervently canvassed, if in different variants, *both* by doctrinaire radical Islamists *and* by at least some of their modernist critics and opponents, because the advent of this state of affairs has occasioned the destruction of the cultural and intellectual traditions underpinning the legal traditions which are native to these countries. In order to appreciate the full force of this, we need to grasp what the triumph of radicalism in North African Islam has actually entailed.

Radicalism As The Expression Of The Intellectual Exhaustion Of Sunni Islam In North Africa

It is possible here to offer only a sketch of what has been happening and what has been at stake. (An analysis which did full justice to these matters would require a book.) The three most important points to be explored are these: first, the way in which the previously hegemonic doctrinal tradition of Sunni Islam in the Maghrib, Malikism, has become irrelevant to the political development of these countries over the last century; second, the full significance of Sayyid Qutb’s innovation in Egyptian radicalism; third, the true nature of the relationship between Islamic reformism and nationalism in Algeria between the 1920s and the 1980s.

The political irrelevance of Malikism since the onset of the crisis of the Ottoman caliphate

Malikism has been the dominant school (*madhhab*) in Sunni Islam in the Maghrib for most of the last thousand years. It was in the name of a strict and militant Malikism that the Almoravids (1055-1146) swept all before them, founded their state in what we now call Morocco and went on to establish an empire which extended far into Spain and east to what is now the Kabylia region of east-central Algeria.²⁸ The empire that succeeded them, that of the Almohads (c.1121-1269), was initially inspired by a complex of doctrines, including important borrowings from Shi‘ism, and expressed *inter alia* a vigorous local reaction against Maliki dogmatism. But Malikism, while

²⁸ Charles-André Julien, *History of North Africa: from the Arab conquest to 1830* (edited and revised by Roger Le Tourneau; translated by John Petrie; edited by C.C. Stewart), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp.78-79, 87-89.

eclipsed for the duration, enjoyed a renaissance from the early 13th century onwards, and none of the politico-religious movements which succeeded the Almohads as the founders of states in Morocco have departed from Malikism as their preferred variant of Sunni legal doctrine. Malikism has also, throughout the same span of history, been the dominant popular tradition of Sunni Islam in Algeria and Tunisia and most of Libya.

Three centuries of Ottoman rule wrought no significant change in this respect; while the Turkish (or more broadly Levantine) elements of the Ottoman ruling caste in Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli (etc.) usually adhered to the Hanafi rite, traditionally dominant in the imperial heartlands, they made no attempt to impose this on the indigenous Maghribi populations, whose adherence to Malikism posed no political problem to speak of and was of course admitted to be entirely legitimate in terms of Sunni doctrine. Colonial rule did not significantly alter this state of affairs either, or, at any rate, it certainly did not do so on its own. While it can be said to have precipitated both political and deeper social changes which constituted some of the major premises of later popular support for Islamic radicalism in the period between the two world wars, it was precisely the advent of this radicalism itself which transformed the religious field in the Maghrib.

The radicalism in question was that of the *Salafiyya*, the movement, initiated by the itinerant Afghan or, more probably, Persian intellectual and activist, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1837-1897) and given intellectual and doctrinal substance by the Egyptian Mohammed Abduh (1849-1905) and his Syrian disciple, Rashid Rida (1865-1935), which preached a revival of Islam on the basis of a return to the teachings and example of the ‘venerable ancestors’ – *al-salaf al-salih* – that is, the founding fathers of Islam, the Prophet Mohammed and his companions, notably the first four ‘rightly guided’ caliphs – *al-Rashidun* – who succeeded the Prophet in the leadership of the *umma*.

Much academic discussion of the Salafiyya movement, especially in respect of its extension to the Maghrib, treats its outlook as largely stable and undifferentiated and as an essentially modernist development within Islam,²⁹ seeking to purge the faith of un-Islamic accretions in order to enable Muslim culture to absorb Western science as the precondition of rising positively to the challenge of the West. The very unhistorical understanding of the movement which has thereby been entertained has disabled analysts from appreciating the real content of its impact and its significance.

The original notion of a return to the founding fathers of the faith implied a return to the most basic tenets of Islam, before the rise of the *madâhib* had enabled a variety of legal and theological (or at any rate exegetical) doctrines to be elaborated. That the originators of the Salafiyya should have tended to this outlook made sense in so far as they were themselves the products of different Islamic traditions; Al-Afghani was almost certainly a Shi‘i,³⁰ Abduh very probably a product of the Hanafi tradition of Sunni Islam in Egypt,³¹ and Rida a product of a complex of contradictory influences which he encountered in his youth in Syria.³² In stressing the Islam of the ancestors, they were stressing what they had in common, the tenets of the faith in its earliest phase, before schisms and

²⁹ This is very much the tendency of Gellner’s writings; see Gellner (1981).

³⁰ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1789-1939* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962], reissued by Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp.108, 230; Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and ‘Abduh: an essay on religious unbelief and political activism in modern Islam*, London: Frank Cass, 1997 [1966], p.7.

³¹ I have found no biographical discussion of Abduh which considers this question properly; the open-mindedness characteristic of ‘Abduh thinking suggests he may have been a product of the comparatively relaxed and liberal Hanafi school; if, as Albert Hourani suggests, ‘Abduh’s family was of Turkish descent on his father’s side, this hypothesis becomes a virtual certainty (Hourani, 1983, p.130).

³² Born in the Tripoli region (now in northern Lebanon; then part of Syria) into a well-to-do family which most probably adhered to the Hanafi rite, Rida was greatly influenced in his youth by the spiritual teachings of Ghazali and briefly attracted into a Sufi order, the Naqshabandi; repelled by some of the latter’s practices, he recoiled from Sufism and progressively embraced the teachings of the predominantly Hanbali theorists (notably Ibn Taymiyya) who condemned Sufism as heretical (Hourani, 1983, pp.224-226).

madâhib and other forms of differentiation had developed. And in proposing in effect to strip Islam down to its essentials, chopping off later accretions as so much dead wood, they were reasonably seen as articulating a modernistic impulse to clear the decks of the superstructure of doctrines perceived both as a complex of obstacles to the assimilation of Western science and as the intellectual bastion of the forces of conservatism in Muslim society – the mystical Sufi orders, the official ‘*ulama* of the Ottoman state and the Al-Azhar establishment in Egypt - at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

But it is not the case that the Salafiyya movement adhered completely to this original outlook. In fact, there are grounds for saying that, in so far as it did so, the movement was exhausted by the eve of the 1st world war. Al-Afghani died in 1897, and Abduh in 1905. This left Rashid Rida, who remained active for the next 30 years, but the orientation he gave the movement departed more and more from what its initial impulses are generally said to have been. Three elements of this modified orientation stand out. First, Rida’s thought came increasingly to identify with Sunni Islam instead of transcending the Sunni-Shi’i dichotomy as the Salafiyya originally tended (and arguably intended).³³ Second, a major preoccupation of his thought became the recasting of the doctrine of the Caliphate.³⁴ Third, his thinking increasingly identified with the doctrines of the Wahhabi movement.

This evolution was undoubtedly, in large part, a direct response to political developments. The cataclysm of the 1st world war transformed the political context of the Middle East in numerous ways; a line of would-be modernist Islamic thought initiated to meet the challenge of West as the source and exemplar of progress in the last decades of the 19th century could scarcely continue to develop itself unperturbed by the catastrophic consequences of the upheaval of 1914-18. Chief among these for Rida were undoubtedly the destruction of the Ottoman empire, the political flux this precipitated from Arabia to Turkey (and especially in Rida’s native Syria), and the abolition of the Caliphate. It was in response to the latter development in 1922 that Rida published his theory of the Caliphate, *Al-Khilafa au al-Imâma ’l-‘Uzma* (‘The Caliphate, or the Supreme Imamate’), in which he reasserted the temporal as well as the religious significance of the office and argued for the continuing relevance and appropriateness of the institution for the political requirements of the modern age.³⁵ And it is in this context that we can understand his growing interest in and approval of the expanding Wahhabi movement in Arabia and his political sympathy with the ambitions and achievements of Ibn Sa‘ud, whose political and military victories he enthusiastically welcomed.³⁶

There is an enormous irony in the fact that the Salafiyya movement evolved into a kind of external endorsement and ally of Wahhabism. A movement of ideas which originally sought to promote a modernising reform of Islam so as to enable the Muslim world to embrace and harness Western science and progress within the medium of the Islamic faith ended up identifying itself with an extremely conservative variant of this faith which has proved profoundly resistant to many if not most aspects of progressive Western thought. There can be little doubt that this evolution owed a lot to Rida, and that it was premised in part on what Rida and the Wahhabis had in common, namely the tradition of the Hanbali *madhab*.

Hanbalism, the doctrines developed by the Muslim thinker Ibn Hanbal, is by far the most rigid of the four *madâhib*. It is distinguished by its extremely conservative teaching on the matter of doctrinal authority, namely its insistence on the Qur’an as the source of authority *qua* revelation (and notably the completion of revelation, the last as well as the most comprehensive revelation of God’s will) and its condemnation of virtually all innovation as blameworthy. In this, it was

³³ Hourani (1983), pp.230-231.

³⁴ Hourani (1983), especially pp.239-244; and Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: the political and legal theories of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Ridâ*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966, chapter V.

³⁵ Kerr (1966), p.158.

³⁶ Hourani (1983), p.231.

vigorously opposed to other schools of thought which sought to give scope to reason as the basis for interpretation of scripture and thus allowed for legitimate forms of innovation in doctrine and precept and thus too in the corpus of law. Hanbalism upholds the authority of scripture itself, accords little or no scope to the exercise of reason, and tends to insist on a literal interpretation of scripture as a result.³⁷

Wahhabism is a reinvigoration of Hanbalism in the Arabian context, and there is a case for the view that the Arabian context was necessary to the reinvigoration of Hanbalism, since the extreme rigidity of the doctrine had tended to limit its appeal in the more sophisticated areas of the Middle East and had ensured that it long remained by far the weakest of the four schools of Sunni Islam in respect of the number of adherents it attracted.³⁸ But what was off-putting in Istanbul and Cairo was no handicap at all in central Arabia. 'Wahhabism' is the name given by outsiders to the teachings of Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703/4-1797/8CE), a native of Uyaina in the central Nejd, the forbidding plateau in the heart of the Arabian peninsular. The movement he led was a classical revivalist movement of the kind which had frequently occurred elsewhere in the Muslim world,³⁹ and the name he and his adepts gave their movement – *Al-Muwahhidun* ('the Unitarians' or 'the Monotheists') – exactly echoed the movement at the origin of the greatest of the Maghribi empires, which has passed into history under the corrupted version of this name as the Almohads.

There is fundamental reason for the recurrence of this name. Islam is the most rigorous of the monotheistic faiths. Its fundamental tenet, upheld against all comers but especially against Christianity and its belief in the Trinity, is the *tawhid*, the belief in the 'unicity' or 'oneness' of God. This tenet was asserted by the Prophet and his companions against the polytheistic beliefs of the Arabs of the Hijaz in the first instance, and only accessorially against Christianity. There has therefore been an inexorable tendency for Islamic revivalist movements to imitate the founding fathers of Islam by taking the polytheistic heresy known as *shirk*, 'associationism' – 'the belief that persons or things may by their association with God partake of his divinity'⁴⁰ – as the principle target of their campaigns to reinvigorate and purify the faith. There was every reason to do this in the circumstances which obtained in the Nejd in the mid-18th century.

Because illiterate tribesmen cannot read the Qur'an, they tend to need personal intermediaries with the divine.⁴¹ Because tribal society in regions far from urban centres of state power is characterised by political fragmentation and permanent insecurity, local communities tend to have their own home-grown religious specialists and to rely on their spiritual protection as well as their mediation in disputes and their guaranteeing of septic tribal frontiers. And because the victory of the new scripturalist faith called Islam could not completely erase previous forms of religious life in rural populations, the persistence of rites and festivals associated with the agrarian calendar tended to ensure the survival of pre-Islamic beliefs. The result of all this was the cult of the saints, local holy men credited with possession of *baraka* (divine grace, charisma, usually manifested in supposedly miraculous powers) who, while claiming to embody and represent Islam, and being accepted locally as such, actually represented a kind of historic compromise between Islamic and pre-Islamic patterns of belief and religious authority.

³⁷ On Hanbalism, see Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: political ideas and movements in the Middle East*, revised edition, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1993, pp.8-10; Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, New York: New York University Press, 2000, pp.67-68.

³⁸ Vassiliev (2000), p.68.

³⁹ For an account, see Vassiliev (2000), chapters 2 and 3. Contemporary Western commentary, especially in, but by no means confined to, the media, tends to present 'Wahhabism' as a unique and peculiar movement; in fact, it belongs in a broad category of revivalist movements of the 18th and 19th centuries which includes the Rahmaniyya in Algeria, the Sanussiyya in Libya and the Mahdiyya in the Sudan.

⁴⁰ Gellner, 'The unknown Apollo of Biskra: the social base of Algerian puritanism', *Government and Opposition*, 9, 1974, 277-310, reprinted in Gellner, E., *Muslim Society* (Cambridge, CUP, 1981, 149-173): 156.

⁴¹ The argument of this paragraph follows Gellner's well known analysis of the cult of the saints in Islam; see Gellner, E., *Saints of the Atlas*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969.

This, in the broadest outline, was what Ibn Abd al-Wahhab was taking on in the Nejd. The movement he launched asserted the authority of the Book and the *‘ilm* of the scholars and jurists against the *baraka* of the saints and thus promoted a standard and correspondingly unifying form of Islam, in which all could participate equally, against the particularistic cults of the saints. This revivalist Islam was thus scripturalist, austere, puritanical and egalitarian, but it was also historically progressive in the Arabian context. In alliance with the Al-Sa‘ud family, it brought about an irreversible revolution in the condition of Arabia. In the religious sphere, backed by the Al-Sa‘ud, the Al-Muwahidun established a unified religious field under the hegemony of Hanbali scripturalism, definitively transcending and superseding the previous condition of central Arabian Islam as fragmented between a plethora of local saint cults.⁴² In the legal sphere it established the dominance of the *Shari‘a* at the expense of un-Islamic tribal law and custom. In the political sphere, between 1750 and 1792, the Al-Sa‘ud, backed by the Al-Muwahidun, established a state for the first time in the history of central Arabia. While the initial success of the Sa‘udi-Wahhabi politico-religious alliance proved temporary, with the Al-Sa‘ud being eventually defeated and reduced to client status as a result of Egyptian expeditions in 1811 and 1816 and a combined Egyptian-Ottoman intervention in 1818-1822, the Sa‘udi-Wahhabi state revived between 1843 and 1865 and, following a second eclipse from 1865 onwards, was re-established in a succession of brilliant campaigns by Abd al-Aziz Ibn Abd al-Rahman Al-Sa‘ud (“Ibn Sa‘ud”) between 1902 and 1932, when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was at last fully established and officially proclaimed.

This, then, is the revivalist tradition which the Salafiyya ended up identifying itself with, a tradition which predated the beginnings of the Salafiyya (circa 1884) by some 140 years! By the time the Salafiyya movement reached the Maghrib in the 1920s, it had resolved itself to most intents and purposes into Wahhabism, that is, the most extreme and sectarian version of the already extremely rigid and conservative Hanbalist tradition. The progress of the Salafiyya in the Maghrib, and above all in Algeria, accordingly entailed the eclipse of the Maghrib’s native traditions of Malikism and their supersession by Wahhabi doctrines and precepts in the name of ‘reform’, *al-islāh*.

That this was the case has been partially obscured by the attention paid to the leader of the reform movement in Algeria, Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis (1889-1940), for Ben Badis was undoubtedly a cultivated thinker who was very well versed in all the main traditions of Sunni thought. But, as Ali Merad has recorded, even Ben Badis was primarily guided by what Merad calls the ‘neo-Hanbalist’ thought of Rashid Rida,⁴³ and which tended to an endorsement of Wahhabist principles and practices as we have seen. And the moment we consider Ben Badis’s principal lieutenants, notably Sheikh Tayeb al-Okbi (1888-1960) and Mubarak al-Mili (1897-1945), the Wahhabist and Sa‘udi orientation of the Algerian reform movement becomes unmistakable.⁴⁴ That this orientation implied the supersession of the specifically Maliki tradition of Algerian Sunni Islam was understood by all and sundry at the time. As Ben Badis himself wrote,

Nous avons déjà eu l’occasion d’écrire que ce qui est à la mesure des Musulmans, ce n’est pas l’école de Malik seul, mais l’Islam avec l’ensemble de ses Écoles.⁴⁵

But what we might call this formally ecumenical attitude towards the differences between the *madāhib* was never translated into a serious effort at synthesis between them. It expressed the detachment of the Algerian reformist movement from the Maliki tradition, a detachment which occurred in effective conjunction with the increasing subordination of this movement to neo-Hanbalism and especially Wahhabism as the emerging hegemonic trends in the Mashriq.

⁴² Vassiliev (2000), pp.79-80.

⁴³ Ali Merad, *Le Reformisme musulman en Algérie de 1925 à 1940: essai d’histoire religieuse et sociale*. Paris-La Haye: Mouton, 1967, pp.190-192.

⁴⁴ Merad (1967), pp.83-84 et seq.; 192-193.

⁴⁵ In an article in *Chihab*, March 1936, page 654, quoted by Merad (1967), p.194.

What we may well, therefore, call the Mashriqi orientation continued to be hallmark of Algerian Islamism after independence in 1962. The short-lived Al-Qiyam association (*Jam'iyat al-Qiyam*, 'the Association of The Values') of 1964-1970 explicitly took its bearings from Middle Eastern Islamism and from the Muslim Brothers and Sayyid Qutb in particular,⁴⁶ the new wave of radicalism which developed in the early 1980s was informed by the thinking of numerous Middle Eastern Islamists (the Egyptians Qutb and Kishk, the Ayatollah Khomeini as well as the classic Hanbali thinker Ibn Taymiyya) and the founders of the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut*, FIS) in 1989 nearly all came from what was by then known as the 'Salafiyyist' trend in contemporary Islamism, a term that no longer connoted a filiation to al-Afghani and Abduh so much as an explicit connection to Sa'udi Arabia and Wahhabist doctrine.⁴⁷

Thus the renewal of radicalism in Algeria since 1962 has confirmed the eclipse of Malikism in Algerian 'political Islam'. By different routes, the same result – the eclipse of the Maliki tradition (and, secondarily, where present, of the Hanafi tradition as well) – has occurred in both of Algeria's eastern neighbours. In Tunisia it occurred as a consequence of the decidedly modernist and pro-Western orientation of the mainstream of Tunisian nationalism under Habib Bourguiba,⁴⁸ but it was further confirmed by the outlook of the Islamist reaction to this in the shape of the *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* (MTI) and its successor, the *Nahda* movement, both led by Rachid Ghannouchi and both of which have been oriented, at least in part, to Middle Eastern trends and have evinced little interest in reinvigorating the Maliki tradition.⁴⁹ In Libya, the eclipse of Malikism (and Hanafism) has been the work of the Qadhafi régime; in seeking to pre-empt the development of an Islamist opposition, but also in seeking to cut the ground from under the feet of the conservative 'ulama linked to urban social forces generally unenthusiastic about or actively hostile to his rule, Qadhafi took the extraordinary step of announcing in 1978 that only the Qur'ân was the source of scriptural authority, disqualifying at a stroke the *Sunna* and the *hadith* as sources of authority and thus disabling the expert connoisseurs of these sources, the 'ulama (of both Maliki and Hanafi schools) – that is, traditionally, 'the men of learning and authority' – from posing any challenge to the regime.⁵⁰

The sole exception to this trend towards the definitive eclipse of Malikism has been the Moroccan case. Morocco was never part of the Ottoman empire and was not seriously affected by its collapse; moreover, while governed by France from 1912 to 1956, Moroccan society was not profoundly disrupted by the Protectorate – in extremely sharp contrast to the devastating impact of colonial rule on Algeria and Libya – and, in particular, the monarchy survived as the keystone of the Moroccan political system. As a result, a specifically Moroccan variant of political Malikism, the Sherifian sultanate or monarchy – has survived to the present day.⁵¹ But even in Morocco, revivalist and

⁴⁶ See Jean Leca & Jean-Claude Vatin, *L'Algérie Politique: institutions et régime*, Paris: FNSP, 1975, pp.308-309, 414-415; Séverine Labat, *Les Islamistes Algériens, entre les urnes et le maquis*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1995, pp.64-65; see also my discussion in *The Battlefield: Algeria 1988-2002, Studies in a broken polity*, London: Verso, 2003, pp.9-11.

⁴⁷ See my article 'From radical mission to equivocal ambition: the expansion and manipulation of Algerian Islamism, 1979-1992' (in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleb, (eds), *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, The Fundamentalism Project, University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp.428-489), pp.466-471.

⁴⁸ Mohamed El-Hedi Cherif, 'Réformes et Islam chez Bourguiba', in *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord 1994*, reprinted in Sophie Ferchiou (ed.), *L'Islam Pluriel au Maghreb*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1996, pp.59-67; see also Derek Hopwood, *Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia: the tragedy of longevity*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992, pp.136-141; and Katerina Dalacoura, *Islam, Liberalism and Human Rights*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1998, pp.151-191.

⁴⁹ Dalacoura (1998); see also Michael Collins Dunn, 'The Al-Nahda movement in Tunisia: from renaissance to revolution; in John Ruedy (ed.), *Islamism and Secularism in North Africa*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994, pp.149-165.

⁵⁰ See Hervé Bleuchot and Taoufik Monastiri, 'L'Islam de M. El Qaddhafi', in Ernest Gellner, Jean-Claude Vatin *et al.*, *Islam et Politique au Maghreb (Actes de la Table Ronde du CRESM, Aix-en-Provence, Juin 1979)*, Paris and Aix-en-Provence: Éditions du CNRS, 1981, pp.213-219; Marius K. Deeb, 'Militant Islam and its critics: the case of Libya', in John Ruedy (ed.), *Islamism and Secularism in North Africa*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994, p.192.

⁵¹ Mohamed Tozy, *Monarchie et Islam politique au Maroc*, 2nd edition, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1999. See also Henry Munson, Jr., *Religion and Power in Morocco*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993.

dissident trends in Moroccan Islam have been aping their eastern neighbours in taking their bearings from the Mashriq, and ‘Salafi’ (i.e. more or less Wahhabi) tendencies have been developing their audience within the society and, as the Casablanca bombings have recently shown, have begun to secrete a violent wing.⁵²

Sayyid Qutb’s innovation in Egyptian Islamism

Egypt is second only to Algeria among the countries which have experienced protracted political violence in the confrontation between radical Islamism and the state in the Sunni Arab world. The radicalism in question has been that of a number of movements which have developed since the 1970s outside the framework of the long-established Association of the Muslim Brothers (*Jam‘iyyat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*) but on the basis of the thinking of the Brother’s most celebrated theorist, Sayyid Qutb, who was hanged on Nasser’s orders in 1966. That Qutb effected a major innovation within the thinking of Egyptian Islamism is generally recognised. What is at issue is the full significance of this innovation.

Gilles Kepel refers to the Association of the Muslim Brothers as the ‘matrix’ of all subsequent forms of radical Islamism.⁵³ In a sense, this is true, at any rate of radicalism in the Sunni Muslim context. But it is true only up to a point, and it is important to establish the limits of the validity of Kepel’s remark.

The Association of the Muslim Brothers was founded in 1928 by a 22-year old schoolmaster from Isma‘iliyya in northern Egypt, Hassan Al-Banna. Over the next twenty years, it developed into the most dynamic movement in Egyptian society, establishing a mass popular base, especially in the towns, and an elaborate apparatus. Socially, it catered for the mass of recently urbanised Egyptians seeking a niche in the bewildering environment of the cities, but also for the urban lower middle classes, petty traders, artisans and intelligentsia. Politically, it became the great rival of the Wafd, the party of the liberal-constitutionalist nationalism - pioneered by Saad Zaghloul in the wake of the 1919 revolution - which appealed to the modernist and at least partially Westernised wing of the middle class; as such the Association was a great asset both to the monarchy and the British (who continued informally to control Egyptian politics to a considerable extent until 1952), since it enabled the authorities to curb the progress of modernist nationalism through a policy of divide and rule. Its international outlook was pan-Islamic, a perspective which underlay and facilitated the extension of the Association to other Arab countries (especially Syria and Jordan) and led it to invest in several broadly ‘anti-imperialist’ themes, notably anti-Zionism, while proffering an alternative to nationalist perspectives properly so-called.

In matters of Islamic doctrine, however, the Muslim Brothers contributed little or nothing that was new. Al-Banna and his associates located their outlook broadly within the tradition of the Salafiyya movement, but did so in consistently vague terms. Al-Banna himself was above all an effective agitator and organiser, but not at all an original thinker,⁵⁴ and he cannot be said to have developed the doctrinal content of Egyptian Islamism except in respect of the essentially practical (and thus secondary) matters of organisation and policy.

The core of Qutb’s revolution in doctrine was the combination of two concepts, the sovereignty of God – *hakimiyyat Allah* – and the new *jahiliyya*.⁵⁵ Qutb argued that a Muslim society recognised the sovereignty of God and of no one and nothing else. Moreover, a nominally Muslim society which

⁵² The bombings at Casablanca on May 16, 2003 have been attributed officially to adepts of a *jihadi* tendency within the wider Salafiyya movement in Morocco. See also Jean-Marie Pontaux, ‘Maroc: révélations sur les réseaux islamistes’, *L’Express*, 22 May 2003.

⁵³ Kepel (2000), p.35.

⁵⁴ Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: religion and politics in the Arab world*, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, p.134; see also Elie Kedourie, *Politics in the Middle East*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.331.

⁵⁵ My discussion of Qutb draws on the already cited works by Ayubi, Kepel, Sivan and Zubaida.

did not acknowledge, and whose government did not rest on, *hakimiyyat Allah*, was one which was no longer truly Muslim, but, on the contrary, was relapsing or had already relapsed into the condition of barbarous ignorance (*jahiliyya*) of God characteristic of Arab society prior to the revelation of God's will to the Prophet Mohammed. In developing this latter element of his vision, Qutb was using the term *jahiliyya* in a new way. Previously, nearly all Islamic thinkers had used it exclusively to refer to the pre-Islamic past. The notion of a new (or contemporary or modern or neo-) *jahiliyya* was a radical innovation and an extremely disturbing one, as we shall see.

The doctrinaire insistence on *hakimiyyat Allah* provided a new and powerful rationale for Islamist opposition to nationalism. Where pan-Islamic thinkers had previously been inclined to base their reticence about nationalism on the fact that it tended to consecrate and politicise divisions within the supra-national or international community of the faithful, the *umma*, Qutb's position attacked nationalism over the quite distinct issue of sovereignty, arguing that, because nationalism asserts the sovereignty of the nation and thus of the people, it denies and usurps that of God; it is this denial and usurpation of God's sovereignty which ensures that nationalism accordingly functions as the vector of Western secular and materialist values and thus of the neo-*jahiliyya*.

The product of the sum of these two theses was a third precept: that societies claiming to be Muslim but actually in thrall to nationalism and the neo-*jahiliyya* were not really Muslim, and that it accordingly behoved true Muslims to denounce them as such. The act of denouncing someone or something as 'not Muslim' or 'un-Islamic' is called *takfir* (from *kafir*, infidel). Thus Qutb's thought led directly to the necessity of *takfir*. As such, Qutb's revolution in Islamist doctrine had momentous implications:

- it legitimated rebellion against a Muslim ruler by denying his Muslim credentials;
- it legitimated *jihad* against fellow-Muslims by denying their quality as Muslims;
- it accordingly legitimated what Muslims would otherwise condemn as *fitna* – dissension within the community of believers – by redefining it as *jihad* – defence of the *umma* against infidels.

This extremely brief summary of the main elements of Qutb's new doctrine would not be disputed by any specialist. What is striking, however, about the main studies of Qutb's innovation (notably those of Emmanuel Sivan and Gilles Kepel) is that, while accurately representing the positive elements of it - the new vision and its constituent elements, they have largely if not entirely overlooked the negative aspects of this development. This is not the place to explore these in their entirety, especially because to do so properly would require the elaboration of a detailed critical analysis of Qutb's arguments that would require a full-length paper to itself. But one crucial point can nonetheless be emphasised. This is the fact that Qutb did not invent either of his two basic concepts, *hakimiyyat Allah* and the new *jahiliyya*, for himself. He found them ready made in the writings of another Islamic thinker, and borrowed them.⁵⁶

This other thinker was the Indian Muslim pamphleteer and activist, Abu 'Ala al-Mawdoodi (1903-1979).⁵⁷ Al-Mawdoodi had developed his ideas in visceral and bitter opposition to the perspectives of Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League which, having broken with the all-Indian nationalism of the Congress as this evolved in an unmistakably Hindu-nationalist direction under Gandhi, had developed the perspective of founding a separate state for India's Muslims, a project realised with the partition of India and the founding of Pakistan.

⁵⁶ Both Sivan (1985) and Kepel (2000) mention this fact, but entirely neglect to draw out its key implication, which is what I am doing here.

⁵⁷ For a brief but useful overview, see Ayubi (1992), pp.127-130.

Al-Mawdoodi was not interested in a nation-state for Muslims, but in an *Islamic* state. He considered that the prospect of Pakistan would not imply the realisation of an Islamic state, and counterposed the latter ideal to Jinnah's project.⁵⁸ Since he does not appear to have had any serious strategy of his own for establishing an all-Indian Islamic state, the basis of his Islamist critique of Jinnah's Muslim nationalism can only be said to have been a reactionary yearning for the supposedly Islamic state of the Moghul India of the pre-colonial era. Al-Mawdoodi eventually came to terms with the fact of Pakistan, migrated there, took Pakistani citizenship, and inspired the development of a virulent Islamist party, the *Jama'at i Islami*, based primarily on the *muhajirun*, that is, other Muslim immigrants into Pakistan like himself.⁵⁹

Qutb developed his ideas, which were eventually embodied in a book called *Ma'alim fi 'l-Tariq* ('Signposts on the path'), while in prison in Nasser's Egypt between 1954 and 1964. It is striking that, in order to find the conceptual foundations for his radicalisation of Egyptian Islamist doctrine and strategy, he had to go to India, so to speak, and borrow the ideas of an Indian Muslim whose thinking had developed in a very different context and under a quite different stimulus.

Thus a major aspect of the negative significance of Qutb's innovation was this: that it, expressed and presupposed the irrelevance of Egyptian Islam's own intellectual traditions, and especially those of both Hanafism and Shafe'ism – historically the established *madâhib* in Egypt – to Egyptian radical Islamist thought. It therefore confirms the thesis I have been outlining here concerning the intellectual exhaustion of the North African Sunni tradition in all its historic variants.

Salafiyyism vs. nationalism in Algerian Islamic activism

Academic representations of the original Salafiyya movement from the 1880s to the 1930s as an intellectually stable and undifferentiated movement have tended to obscure both the real character of the movement and the peculiar nature of its evolution and thus its true place in the complex history of the Middle East over this period. Academic representations of the movement of reform – *islah* – in Algeria between 1925 and 1954 which similarly ascribe to it a stable and uniform outlook have been equally mystificatory, and have especially tended to mystify the relationship between Ben Badis's movement and both the national revolution of 1954-1962 and the place of 'official Islam' in the project and practice of the Algerian state during the first two decades of independence.

It is a striking fact about Ernest Gellner's account of the Algerian case⁶⁰ that it makes no mention whatever of a – if not *the* – major feature of the historical context of Ben Badis's movement, namely the development of a nationalist variant of anti-colonial politics openly challenging the premises of French rule.⁶¹ This movement was an exact contemporary of the movement for Islamic reform. It took shape in the 1920s with the foundation of the explicitly nationalist *Étoile Nord-Africaine*, based on the Muslim migrant workers in France, in March 1926, and, when the ENA's leader, Messali Hadj, intervened at the Muslim Congress in Algiers in 1936 to challenge the leaders of all the other tendencies – including Ben Badis's AUMA – in Algerian Muslim politics, he effectively launched the nationalist movement in Algeria itself, the word subsequently becoming flesh with the creation of Messali's *Parti du Peuple Algérien* in Algiers in March 1937.

⁵⁸ Ayubi (1992), p.128.

⁵⁹ Ayubi (1992), pp.128-129.

⁶⁰ Gellner (1974).

⁶¹ For a critique of Gellner's perspective, see my article 'Ernest Gellner and the Algerian army: the intellectual origins of the problem of Algerian studies in Britain', *Journal of Algerian Studies*, 2 (1997), 27-42, and my working paper 'From segmentarity to opacity: on Gellner and Bourdieu, or why Algerian politics have eluded theoretical analysis and vice versa', *Crisis States Working Paper* No.19 (December 2002), published in the French original as: 'De la segmentarité à l'opacité: à propos de Gellner et Bourdieu et les approches théoriques à l'analyse du champ politique algérien', *Insaniyat: Revue algérienne d'anthropologie et de sciences sociales*, 19-20 (January-June 2003), pp.65-95.

The story of the Badisiyya is not simply a matter of a movement of Islamic reform, largely inspired by neo-Hanbali and Wahhabi doctrines, on the one hand and its dual targets of (i) the marabouts and the *turuq*, guilty of *bid'a* ('blameworthy innovation')⁶² and *shirk*, and (ii) the French-educated 'assimilationists', guilty of denying Algeria's irrevocably 'Arabo-Islamic' identity, on the other hand. It is also the story of the complex relationship of Islamism and nationalism, and of the divisions which accordingly developed within the Islamic reform movement itself.

Gellner's account suggests a binary division within the leadership of the Badisiyya. He postulates a simple contrast between the approach favoured by Ben Badis himself, the cultivated scion of the *haute bourgeoisie* of Constantine, sensitive to various doctrinal currents and concerned above all both to *persuade* Algerian Muslims to rally to the movement and to preserve the latter's unity, and the very different approach of Tayyib Al-Uqbi, the parvenu firebrand from Biskra on the edge of the Sahara, the scourge of *bid'a* and *shirk*, whose doctrinaire outlook was vented in an incendiary oratorical style and a provocative and sectarian attitude to all who persisted in error. But this dichotomy between the 'moderate', even conciliatory, middle class leader and his zealously radical and intransigent deputy – which we find formally reincarnated in the tandem of Abassi Madani and Ali Ben Hadj in the leadership of the FIS in 1989-1991 – overlooks the third leg of what was actually a tripod, the presence of another current of thinking within the AUMA in the 1930s and thereafter, which furnished the real counterpoint to al-Uqbi's outlook.

This current of thinking was led by Sheikh Larbi Tebessi (1891-1957), whom Gellner never mentions. The opposition between the two tendencies was multifaceted. Whereas Al-Uqbi was schooled in the Wahhabi doctrines which he had imbibed during his years in Arabia,⁶³ Tebessi never visited Arabia and was a product rather of Egyptian influence and especially that of Al-Azhar, the great Islamic university in Cairo traditionally regarded as the citadel of Sunni Muslim thought and teaching.⁶⁴ Whereas Al-Uqbi, in line with Wahhabi doctrine, was above all preoccupied with extirpating *bid'a* and *shirk* and aggressively hostile to the *turuq* and the *zawâyâ*, and gave little attention to attacking the French-educated 'assimilationists', Tebessi was far less intolerant of Algeria's own religious traditions, notably the *zawâyâ*, which he appears to have sought to reform rather than sweep away,⁶⁵ and more inclined to counterpose the cultural-nationalist dimension of the AUMA's vision to the French-oriented assimilationism of Ferhat Abbas and Co. Whereas Al-Uqbi vigorously insisted that the AUMA should have no political objectives and should in particular abstain from challenging the colonial regime, a position he elevated into a virtual dogma and inflected in a direction which tacitly but unmistakably worked out as a form of acceptance of – if not even loyalty towards – French sovereignty in Algeria,⁶⁶ Tebessi was clearly sympathetic to the separatist nationalist tendency then developing within Algerian society,⁶⁷ and appears to have been

⁶² A term regularly used to stigmatise Sufi practices in particular.

⁶³ Al-Uqbi, born in 1888, lived in the Hijaz in his youth, where his brother Mustafa was employed at Medina, and where he himself became acquainted with and converted to the doctrines of the Wahhabis; he returned to Algeria only in 1920 (Merad, 1967, p.85).

⁶⁴ Merad (1967), p.102. Merad paints a striking but essentially condescending and dismissive picture of Tebessi as a very conservative figure, guided by an old-fashioned if not medieval conception of strict Sunni orthodoxy and as such not only backward looking but also out of tune with his more radical companions imbued with correct Salafi ideas. There are grounds for doubting the overall reliability of this portrait, as we shall see.

⁶⁵ This is a hypothesis on my part rather than a finding which I am able to document fully; it is partly an inference from Merad's description of Tebessi's conservative views being so at variance with the doctrinal radicalism of the other AUMA leaders that, as Merad puts it, "on peut se demander si la tendance de L. Tebessi ne fut pas en réalité une sorte de déviation de l'orientation réformatrice du *Chihab*" (Merad, 1967, p.104; '*Chihab*' was the title of the AUMA's main publication). But it is also a (perhaps more risky) inference from the behaviour of the post-independence Algerian state, which followed a very discriminating policy towards the *zawâyâ*, a policy, moreover, implemented very largely by former followers of Tebessi (see below).

⁶⁶ Merad (1967), pp.88-89; see also Mahfoud Kaddache, *Histoire du Nationalisme Algérien: question nationale et politique algérienne, 1919-1954*, tome II, Algiers: SNED, 1980, p.592.

⁶⁷ Charles-Robert Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algérie Contemporaine, II: De l'insurrection de 1871 au déclenchement de la guerre de libération (1954)*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979, pp.461, 580.

hostile to any attempt to counterpose the *islah* to the development of nationalist impulses in Algerian public opinion. And, whereas Al-Uqbi, faithful to his Wahhabi tutors, was hostile to modern Western thought, Tebessi was deeply interested in it, and had books by Adam Smith, Karl Marx, André Gide, Jean Cocteau and Friedrich Nietzsche in his personal library.⁶⁸

The conflict between these two outlooks, and the men who embodied them, first came to a head on the death of Ben Badis in May 1940. It is clear that the colonial administration sought to secure the succession of Al-Uqbi, whom it had every reason to regard as a safe pair of hands from the French point of view.⁶⁹ It is less clear that Al-Uqbi was himself set on assuming the leadership of the AUMA. But there is no doubt at all that it was Larbi Tebessi who, with Sheikh Mubarak Al-Mili, led the opposition to Al-Uqbi's candidacy, and ensured the succession of Sheikh Bachir Al-Ibrahimi instead.⁷⁰

Al-Ibrahimi (1889-1965) was a compromise choice for the succession to Ben Badis, but a very appropriate one.⁷¹ The leader of the AUMA in western Algeria, where he made the old city of Tlemcen his headquarters, but a native of the Setif region in eastern Algeria, Al-Ibrahimi had lived for many years in the Mashriq, but in Damascus rather than Cairo, let alone the Hijaz. While profoundly marked by the Salafiyya tradition, he was less oriented to Wahhabism than Al-Uqbi and less obsessed with attacking the *туруq* and the *zawâyâ*, in part because, having been exposed to the pan-Arab, linguistic and cultural aspect of the *Nahda* ('renaissance') in Syria, he was at least as much interested in promoting the revival of the Arabic language in Algeria as in purifying the Algerian religious field, a fact which was appreciated by the tacitly nationalist current within the AUMA and underlay their support for him. Noted in addition for his erudition and his urbanity, his personal courtesy and the finesse and persuasiveness of his rhetorical style, he was much the best fitted of Ben Badis's lieutenants to hold the AUMA together after the disappearance of its founder.

But the very qualities which enabled him to do this, and in particular the ambiguity of his attitude to the national question, were to prove wasting assets. As the radicalisation of the crisis in Algeria proceeded in the late 1940s in the wake of the appalling massacres perpetrated by the French after an abortive nationalist rising in May 1945 and the resort to blatant election-rigging by the French administration in 1948 to thwart the rise of the nationalist party, Al-Ibrahimi appears to have felt his own position to be increasingly untenable. The emergence of an increasingly explicit nationalist tendency within the AUMA, based primarily on younger men recruited in the course of the 1940s who shared a clear sympathy for the developing nationalist movement and its separatist project,⁷² enlarged the constituency and audience for Larbi Tebessi's outlook within the Association.⁷³ In 1951, Al-Ibrahimi appears to have decided that he could no longer lead the AUMA and took himself off into what was in effect self-imposed exile in the Mashriq, staying successively in Cairo and Jeddah in the Hijaz.

⁶⁸ See the fascinating report: 'Tebessa: la bibliothèque personnelle du cheikh Larbi Tebessi' in the Algerian daily paper *El Watan*, 3 August 2001.

⁶⁹ Merad (1967), p.91; see also Amar Hellal, *Le Mouvement Reformiste Algérien (1831-1957)*, Algiers: Office des Publications Universitaires, 2002, p.132 fn 25.

⁷⁰ Merad (1967), pp.80 & 102.

⁷¹ This paragraph draws on the detailed and sympathetic portrait in Merad (1967), pp.79-83.

⁷² Luc-Willy Deheuvels, *Islam et Pensée Contemporaine en Algérie*, Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1991, p.46.

⁷³ Deheuvels (1991) suggests that Tebessi only radicalised his positions under pressure from the younger generation, but this overlooks the fact that Tebessi already had a substantial nationalist record: he had taken an active part in the leadership of the *Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté* (AML), a nationalist movement launched by Ferhat Abbas in 1943 to which the AUMA and the PPA briefly adhered, and he had himself been arrested by the French authorities for his activities at this time (Ageron, 1979, p.580). In discussing the relations between the radical nationalist PPA and the AUMA as of 1948, Omar Carlier notes that Tebessi was the representative of the tendency within the AUMA sympathetic to the PPA; see Carlier, O., *Entre Nation et Jihad: histoire sociale des radicalismes algériens*, Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1995, p.378.

He did not formally resign his position, however, and while Tebessi took effective responsibility for the Association from this point onwards, his status initially was only that of a caretaker.⁷⁴ It was in these confused circumstances that, following the onset of the armed insurrection launched by the FLN in November 1954, Al-Ibrahimi from his Cairo exile sought to determine the AUMA's position, firmly rejecting an invitation from the FLN to endorse the rising. That this did not accurately reflect the outlook of the AUMA inside the country is suggested by the fact that Tebessi continued to serve as its *de facto* leader, and formally assumed the interim presidency of the association in 1954. Within a little over a year, in January 1956, Tebessi announced the AUMA's support for the objectives of the insurrection,⁷⁵ and by June of the same year the AUMA had publicly rallied to the FLN and been incorporated into its organisational structures, and secured representation on its supreme instance, the *Conseil National de la Révolution Algérienne* (CNRA), at the FLN's first congress in the Soummam valley the following August.

Tebessi was to pay the supreme price for the – arguably decisive – role he played in the reorientation of the AUMA, and thus of the Algerian Islamist movement at that time, towards the nationalist vision and its practical expression in the FLN's revolutionary project. During the night of 4-5 April 1957, he was arrested, presumably by French police, at his home and was never seen by his family or friends again. There is little doubt that he was murdered by the French, and his body either destroyed or buried in a secret grave. There is reason to believe that he was put to death on orders from Paris, and that a key role in this lethal decision was played by the then minister of justice, François Mitterrand, whose role in ordering the execution of Larbi Ben M'Hidi, the principal leader of the FLN in the Battle of Algiers, in March 1957 is now widely admitted. Tebessi, the leader of the nationalist wing of the Algerian '*ulama*', is the only member of the AUMA's leadership to have been killed by the French, who can realistically be assumed to have known what they were doing.⁷⁶

The decapitation of the nationalist tendency within reformist Islam in Algeria was to have long-term consequences. For the rest of the war, the AUMA remained incorporated within the organisational structures of the FLN and was represented on the CNRA and, from September 1958 onwards, in the Provisional Government (*Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne*, GPRA), notably by Ahmed Tawfiq Al-Madani. But this relationship came in question after independence, and in the vacuum of leadership since Tebessi's death, which Al-Madani had only formally and provisionally filled, Al-Ibrahimi was able to make a triumphant come-back, seizing the leadership of the '*ulama* on his return from exile and leading it into public opposition to Ben Bella's regime in the spring of 1964.

Gellner's notion that the reformist Islam of Ben Badis became the substantive ideology – and not merely the official religion – of the Algerian state at independence is misleading. It is true that the cultural-nationalist aspect of the AUMA's propaganda, summed up in the famous triptych: 'Islam is my religion, Arabic my language, Algeria my fatherland', was adopted by the wartime FLN and promoted by the successive Algerian governments after 1962. And it is also true that official Islam after 1962 reproduced and propagated the austere, egalitarian and scripturalist aspects of the Reformers' message. But to suggest that this reflected a general ideological hegemony of the reformist '*ulama* over the nation state is entirely mistaken. It reflected only the extent that the FLN had shared these elements of the Badisiyya's outlook and incorporated them in its own project.

⁷⁴ Deheuvels (1991), pp.45-46.

⁷⁵ An interesting discussion of Tebessi's contacts with the FLN prior to January 1956 is provided by Khalifa Mameri, *Abane Ramdane, héros de la guerre d'Algérie*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1988, 170-172.

⁷⁶ In a recent book, Gilbert Meynier reports an alternative version which attributes Tebessi's death to the FLN, which supposedly executed him for being a French agent (Meynier, *Histoire Intérieure du FLN 1954-1962*, Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2002, p.190 and fn. 192). This is the first time such a suggestion has been put into circulation in the 45 years since Tebessi's disappearance, and Meynier acknowledges that his only source for this theory is...the French intelligence services.

As a distinct movement of ideas, the Badisiyya had shot its bolt by 1962, if not long before. The specifically religious aspect of its campaign, *al-islah* – the reform of the Algerian religious field – had been largely (although not entirely) accomplished, and the broader cultural objective, the promotion of the Arabo-Muslim identity of Algeria in opposition to the ‘assimilationist’ perspectives of the French-educated ‘*évolués*’, had also been effectively achieved, in so far as the ‘assimilationists’ themselves had abandoned their original perspective of political progress within the framework of French rule as early as 1943, had thereafter adopted a ‘moderate’ and legalist variant of the nationalist idea and had eventually rallied to the FLN in 1956 at the same time as the AUMA, their leader, Ferhat Abbas, being allowed to do the honours as first president of the GPRA from 1958 to 1961.⁷⁷ But the victory of Ben Badis’s vision of Algeria over Abbas’s original vision was actually mediated through the victory of the separatist nationalism of Messali Hadj, the founder of the *Étoile Nord Africaine* in 1926 and the PPA in 1937. It was the success of Messali and the PPA in winning public opinion to the ideal of national independence which spurred Abbas to take up this idea in 1943, and it was Messali’s political heirs, the younger activist generation in the PPA, who founded the FLN and launched the war of national liberation in 1954.

In short, the triumph of the ideas of the reformist ‘*ulama* was mediated through the success of the nationalist movement, and the national revolution was both the apotheosis but also the supersession of the Badisiyya as well as Messalism,⁷⁸ for the Badisiyya had by then exhausted its repertoire of ideas as a force for change. As one leading Algerian Muslim intellectual, Abdelmadjid Meziane, was to observe in 1970, “the Islam of *Salafi* reformism...began as a revolution with Ibn Badis and his companions, then declined little by little to the point where it played the role of conservatism from 1954 onwards.”⁷⁹

This conservatism of the Salafi ‘*ulama* became very clear after 1962. It was expressed both in Al-Ibrahimi’s championing of middle class opposition to the Ben Bella government and in the perspectives of the Islamic grouping founded in January 1964, the *Jam‘iyyat al-Qiyam* (the Association of the Values). *Al-Qiyam* was not so much hostile to Ben Bella, for its members included some of his close associates, as to the modernist and Marxisant left in Algerian politics who at least intermittently had Ben Bella’s ear, notably in the elaboration of the policies and doctrine of Algerian socialism. Its outlook was a combination of four main elements: hostility to Western and especially Marxist thought, social conservatism (notably with reference to the family, sexual mores and the position of women, but also in respect of the defence of private property), hostility – in the name of the pan-Islamic ideal – to nationalism, and an unmistakeable orientation to the Mashriq as the source of ideas as well as values. Tolerated initially as a counterweight to the secularist Left, it eventually fell foul of Boumediène’s regime when it publicly denounced President Nasser for the execution of Sayyid Qutb in August 1966, and was placed under a banning order which put an end to its activities in the wilaya of Algiers, before being completely dissolved by decree in 1970.

In so far as new thinking was occurring within, or at any rate about, Algerian Islam during the 1950s, it was developed by Malek Bennabi (1905-1973), and thus located outside the framework of the Badisiyya. If any one Muslim thinker, writer and teacher in Algeria can be said to have theorised the

⁷⁷ Clearly, a major practical aspect of the AUMA’s purpose, the effective promotion of the Arabic language, remained to be fully accomplished at Independence, despite the success of such local initiatives as the AUMA was able to take in the 1925-1954 period.

⁷⁸ I have discussed the way in which the FLN was the supersession of Messalism – the politics of Messali’s PPA – in my article ‘The FLN: French conceptions, Algerian realities’, in George Joffé (ed.), *North Africa: nation, state and region*, London, Routledge, 1993, 111-141, republished in a corrected version in Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield*, chapter 2.

⁷⁹ Abdelmadjid Meziane, ‘Le vide idéologique’, article in Algerian daily newspaper *al-Sha‘ab*, 19 January 1970, cited in Deheuvels (1991), p.113. Born 1926, Meziane worked for the FLN during the war and served as Minister of Culture (1982-1986) and as President of the Haut Conseil Islamique in 1998; he died in 2001.

project of the FLN-state after 1962, it was Bennabi, not Ben Badis.⁸⁰ Had Gellner attempted to integrate a proper consideration of Bennabi's ideas and influence into his discussion,⁸¹ it would have complicated his picture very considerably. Arguably, it would have undermined his thesis altogether. Gellner does not mention him.

Bennabi broadly supported the Badisiyya's assertion of Algeria's 'Arabo-Muslim' personality, but his writings explored and criticised the limitations of the Badisiyya as a movement articulating a superficial and fundamentally hollow form of identity politics.

Whereas the initial impact of the *islah*, in at least temporarily challenging the ignorance and inertia into which the Muslims had sunk, had been salutary, Bennabi considered that the movement had then deviated into a kind of 'political maraboutism' (i.e., charlatanism), in which the reformers' concern to refute French colonialist theses and their tendency to indulge in apologetics for Arabo-Muslim civilization while diverting their energies into political agitation over Algerian Muslims' 'rights' had supplanted the original objective of *reform*.⁸² While the AUMA had canvassed the abstract notion of the 'Arabo-Muslim' identity in opposition to the colonial and assimilationist thesis of '*l'Algérie française*'; the question of the substantive content of Algeria's Muslim culture – and, more generally, that of contemporary Muslim civilisation as a whole – remained to be addressed, for the Badisiyya had had nothing to say about it.

Bennabi advanced this critique of the Algerian *islah* and of the wider Salafiyya movement within which it had located itself in the course of developing an entirely different vision concerned, not with the problem of purifying the faith nor with the problem of rejecting the French identity, but with the quite distinct problem of *decadence* – the decadence of Muslim society in the Maghrib.

Fundamental to Bennabi's thought was the problem of what he called 'post-Almohad man'.⁸³ The Almohad empire had been the apogee of Muslim civilisation in the Maghrib; Maghribi society had been in decline ever since, and it was this decadence which, by entailing the *colonisability* of Maghribi society,⁸⁴ explained the French conquest. It followed that what was required was not so much the extirpation of *bid'a* and *shirk* and the assertion of scripturalism or even the assertion of the Arabo-Muslim identity, but a far more profound resurgence of Muslim civilisation that would end and reverse the decadence into which this civilisation had fallen centuries before. Where Al-Uqbi and his acolytes had acquired and acted upon a Procrustean vision of the Algerian religious field, seeking to purify Algerian Islam by amputating it of its characteristic features, the *turuq* and the cult of the saints, Bennabi developed a Promethean vision, the revolutionary vision of overcoming decadence by overcoming 'post-Almohad man' through a reinvigoration of Muslim civilization by means of a profound cultural revolution. In this way his thought bore witness to his interest in the writings of Nietzsche, and especially in Nietzsche's idea of 'self-overcoming',⁸⁵ and to the fact that the substantive spiritual (although not, of course, theological) content of this idea was close, if not identical, to the meaning of the greater *jihad*, the effort involved in overcoming oneself *fi sabil Allah*, on the path of God, that is, in securing salvation.

⁸⁰ The affinity between Bennabi's outlook and that of the Boumediène regime has been noted by Allan Christelow in his article 'An Islamic humanist in the 20th century: Malik Bennabi', *The Maghreb Review*, 17, 1-2, 1992, 69-83, 73.

⁸¹ 'Gellner, 'The unknown Apollo of Biskra'.

⁸² This view is stated in particular in Bennabi's *Les Conditions de la Renaissance: problèmes d'une civilisation*, Algiers, 1947, reprinted 1948, republished Algiers: Société d'Édition et de Communication, 1992; see especially pp.14-20 (i.e. the chapter entitled 'Idole').

⁸³ Malek Bennabi, *Vocation de l'Islam*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1954, 19-39.

⁸⁴ Bennabi (1954), p.33.

⁸⁵ The chapter on 'L'Homme post-almohadien' in *Vocation de l'Islam* (Bennabi, 1954, pp.29-33) is prefaced by a quotation from the French edition of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: "Malheur! Les temps sont proches où l'homme ne jettera plus par-dessus les hommes la flèche de son désir, où les cordes de son arc ne sauront plus vibrer."

Bennabi, whose activism was initially limited to animating a discussion circle based in Algiers university from 1963 onwards, may seem to have been a marginal figure in Algerian affairs in the early 1960s.⁸⁶ The controversy over the relationship of Islam to the fledgling nation-state was initially dominated by the louder voices of *Al-Qiyam* and Al-Ibrahimi. This state of affairs testifies to the fact that, far from 'Reformist Islam' in Algeria having an unproblematical relationship to the newly restored sovereign state, and this state accepting the reformist '*ulama*'s hegemony without demur, as Gellner and others have suggested, the true relationship was one of considerable conflict and adversarial manoeuvring. It was only after the conservative '*ulama*' had become leaderless with Al-Ibrahimi's death on May 20, 1965, and the state had freed itself from the encumbrance of Ben Bella's erratic and off-putting political style with Boumediène's coup the following month, that the ground was cleared for the development of an effective political relationship between Algerian nationalism in power and the Algerian Islamist tradition.⁸⁷ This relationship involved the hegemony of Algerian nationalism over Algerian Islamism, not – as Gellner implies – the other way round, and one of its organisational premises was the qualified recovery of the tendency within Algerian Islam previously incarnated in Larbi Tebessi.

This recovery was qualified precisely because the nation-state under Boumediène was intent on keeping, indeed monopolising, the initiative, an attitude and strategy which implied among other things the denial to the former AUMA of any independent role or, indeed, a legal existence. Former AUMA activists were relied on to staff the ministry of religious affairs and the other institutions set up to regulate the religious field, while the dead Sheikh Al-Ibrahimi's son, Dr Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, was notably included in successive governments (but never as minister for religious affairs). But the AUMA itself ceased to have any active presence or role, while Boumediène and his closest collaborators set about elaborating and implementing their ambitious project of state-directed national reconstruction and development through other organisational arrangements. And this state of affairs meant that the recovery of the nationalist tendency in the old AUMA was not a public event, but an extremely discreet affair.

In making the political arrangements within the power structure which were indispensable to the practical implementation of its project, the Boumediène régime made maximum use of the surviving nationalist tendency within the old AUMA. This tendency, although primarily incarnated in the late Larbi Tebessi, had been reinforced, as already noted, by the younger generation of activists who had joined the Association in the 1940s and early 1950s and who had been imbued with the nationalist ideal. Many of these went on to play active roles in the liberation struggle between 1954 and 1962 as officers in the *Armée de Libération Nationale*, and their energies and support were enlisted by Boumediène when he took overall command of the ALN as Chief of its General Staff in 1960.

One of these officers, Commandant (later Colonel) Mohamed Salah Yahiaoui, was named a member of the Council of the Revolution set up by Boumediène following his overthrow of Ben Bella in June 1965, and then appointed commander of the 3^d Military Region (Bechar), which controlled the sensitive southern section of the frontier with Morocco as well as the frontiers with Western Sahara and Mali, the following November. In 1969, Yahiaoui was given the key post of Commander of the Combined Services Academy at Cherchell, which he held until October 1977, when he was appointed Coordinator of the Party of the FLN with the brief to prepare it for a major enhancement of its role in the system of government.

Another such officer was Commandant (subsequently Colonel, then General). El-Hachemi Hadjerès, who abandoned his studies in 1956 to join the guerrilla forces of *wilaya* II (Nord-

⁸⁶ He was, however, sufficiently appreciated in the senior circles of the FLN state to be appointed Director of Higher Education in 1964 (Christelow, op. cit., 79), a post he retained under Boumediène until he resigned in 1967 in order to devote himself full time to writing and teaching..

⁸⁷ For a fuller discussion of this point, see Hugh Roberts (2003), chapter 1.

Constantinois), and subsequently served on the ALN General Staff until 1962. He was then appointed Director of the Army's Political Commissariat, a post he held until December 1974, when he was appointed to the important 5th Military Region (Constantine), which controlled all of the eastern third of Algeria north of the Sahara.

It is a remarkable fact that the Boumediène régime should have relied on elements drawn, via the ALN, from what we may call the Tebessi 'current' within the AUMA to supervise the political education of the army as a whole and the training of the officer corps at Cherchell, not to mention the attempted reinvigoration of the Party. It is also worth noting that, in so far as the *ulama* had an organised presence outside the bureaucratic structures of the ministry of religious affairs, this was on the High Islamic Council (*Haut Conseil Islamique*), whose president throughout the Boumediène era was a close disciple of Tebessi, Sheikh Ahmed Hamani.⁸⁸ And up until his death in 1973, Malek Bennabi, who shared with Tebessi a strong family connection with the town of Tebessa⁸⁹ as well as an interest in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, not only enjoyed the freedom to organise his study circle in Algiers but also wrote regularly for the government daily *El Moudjahid* and the FLN weekly *Révolution Africaine*, and enjoyed the status of the régime's leading unofficial spokesman on ideological affairs until shortly before his death in 1973.

In retrospect, we can see that the Boumediène régime had a very intelligent and consistent strategy for managing the Algerian religious field. This strategy can be summed up as the promotion of a socially and culturally progressive national Islam, a perspective which, grounded in the ambitious vision of a revolutionary nationalist Algeria spearheading a wider renaissance of Muslim civilization through a collective process of self-overcoming,⁹⁰ not only was able to endorse and even think to some purpose about the place of socialism in this civilizational project but also, and crucially, gave an entirely progressive content to the traditional notion of the greater *jihad*, identifying this with the effort to refound Muslim civilization through the overcoming of the economic underdevelopment, social backwardness, cultural stagnation and intellectual dependence, that is, the condition of post-Almohad man. It is the abortion of this revolutionary project with the death of Boumediène that constitutes the immediate historic premise of the advent of reactionary Islamism in Algeria.

The rise of the Islamist movement in 1981-82 was actively facilitated and connived at by the Chadli presidency in order to use this movement as an auxiliary force in its purge of leftists and Boumedienists, exactly as Anwar Al-Sadat had sought to exploit Egyptian Islamism in the early 1970s in his campaign against leftists and Nasserists.⁹¹ The Chadli regime repeated this exercise on a vastly greater scale in 1989-90, when it legalised and connived at the electoral success of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in order to ensure the political defeat of the nationalist tradition, embodied in the Party of the FLN,⁹² which was opposed to the presidency's rapprochement with Mitterrand's France - and its concomitant espousal of doctrinaire economic liberalism - at the expense of Algerian national sovereignty. On both occasions, the Chadli Presidency acted with French support, which it needed in proportion to its loss of internal support in Algerian society. Because the Chadli regime had abandoned the socialist policies of its predecessor without replacing them with an alternative progressive project, it was unable to stigmatise the Islamist movement as

⁸⁸ Deheuvels (1991), p.45.

⁸⁹ Bennabi was born in Constantine but grew up mainly in Tebessa; he left a moving evocation of the town in his autobiographical *Mémoires d'Un Témoin du Siècle*, Algiers: Éditions Nationales Algériennes, 1965.

⁹⁰ This vision also, notably, placed the nascent Muslim world at the heart of a nascent Third World as whole; for a contemporary analysis of this vision, see the chapter 'L'Algérie montreur de conduite du Tiers Monde' in Bruno Etienne, *L'Algérie, Cultures et Révolution*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977; in this respect, Algeria's international outlook in the Boumediène era was prefigured by Bennabi's writings; see his book *L'Afro-Asiatisme*, 1st edition Cairo, 1956; republished Algiers: Société d'Édition et de Communication, 1992.

⁹¹ Roberts (2003), chapters 1, 4 and 7.

⁹² For a detailed exposition of this thesis, see Roberts (1994).

reactionary. And because the Chadli regime had also abandoned the nationalist vision and principles of the Boumediène regime, it was unable to counterpose a national Islam to the Islamists, and resorted to encouraging Berberists and secularists to mobilise in rival forms of identity politics to limit the Islamist advance, while simultaneously encouraging a revival of the *turuq* and the *zawâyâ* and exploring the fault lines within the Islamist movement with a view to playing off the various tendencies against one another.

In Western journalistic analyses of the Algerian Islamist movement in the critical period of 1990-1992, the main division to be postulated was that between 'radical' and moderate' elements of the Islamist movement.⁹³ This division was primarily a figment of the Western imagination, or rather of the Western lack of imagination, a product of the contemporary Western insistence on projecting Western categories onto unfamiliar polities in exotic countries. The real division within Algerian Islamism that actually existed and mattered was that between the tendency known as the Salafiyyists and the tendency known as the *Jaza'ara*.

By 1990, if not some time before this date, the term *Salafiyyun* no longer indicated disciples of Abduh and Rida so much as the tendency openly oriented and linked to Wahhabism. Most of the Islamist groupings which developed in Algeria in the course of the 1980s belonged in one sense or another to the Salafi trend. The principle exception to this rule was the grouping which developed in intellectual circles in Algiers, and which consciously saw itself as the intellectual heirs of Malek Bennabi, and which opposed the Wahhabi trend in the name of a specifically Algerian vision which took the Algerian nation seriously. This was the *Jaza'ara* (from the Arabic for Algeria, *Al-Jaza'ir*) – 'the Algerianists'.⁹⁴

In other words, the conflict between Salafiyyism and nationalism which first emerged within Algerian Islamism in the 1930s, resurfaced in 1951-54 and again in 1962-66, resurfaced once more within Algerian Islamism in the 1990s; the only difference was that, on this occasion, unlike all previous occasions, the nationalist side lost.

The founders of the FIS came overwhelmingly from the Salafi trend. The sole exceptions to this were Abassi Madani himself, a veteran of (the Islamist current within) the FLN, and a number of younger figures from eastern Algeria – and thus outside the *Jaza'ara*'s catchment area - who had been active instead in Abdallah Djaballah's Islamic Group (*al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*), which was of indeterminate doctrinal pedigree and claimed to locate itself within the tradition of Algerian nationalism as well as Algerian Islamism.⁹⁵ The *Jaza'ara*, on the other hand, had nothing to do with the FIS at first, and its leading light, Mohamed Saïd, had actively argued against the founding of an Islamist political party in early 1989, insisting that Algerian Islamism should concentrate on the religious and cultural mission of the *da'wa* and eschew electoral politics altogether. It was only after the municipal and regional elections in June 1990, in which the FIS won a landslide victory and the FLN was humiliated, that the *Jaza'ara* made the fateful decision to stake everything on the entrust strategy of rallying to the FIS in an attempt to seize control of it.

There is not the space here to do justice to the complex politics of the terrible violence which has ravaged Algeria since 1991. But the conventional view of this violence as arising out of simple confrontation between radical Islamism and the state is wholly inadequate and misleading. It

⁹³ This point is developed in detail in Roberts (1994), pp.466-471.

⁹⁴ For discussion, see Roberts (1994) and Labat (1995), pp.129-175.

⁹⁵ Djaballah did not throw in his lot with the FIS when this was founded in February-March 1989 and eventually founded his own party, the Islamic Renaissance Movement (*Mouvement de la Nahda Islamique*, *Harakat al-Nahda al-Islamiyya*) in 1990. He lost control of this in 1999 and launched a new party, the Reform Movement (*Harakat al-Islah*) which became the largest legal Islamist party in the legislative elections in May 2002. Djaballah now locates his outlook in the tradition of the Muslim Brothers while insisting – plausibly – that he has always been organisationally independent of the Egyptian movement of this name.

entirely abstracts from what has been at issue both within the state power structure on the one hand and within the Islamist movement on the other hand. In essence, the most important struggle has been between nationalist and post-nationalist tendencies for control of the Islamist movement in Algeria, both in its first incarnation as a legal political party (the FIS) and in its subsequent incarnations in the armed movements, the *Mouvement Islamique Armé* (MIA) of 1992-1994, the MIA's successor, the *Armée Islamique du Salut* (AIS) of 1994-2000, and the MIA-AIS's rival, the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA).

Repeated attempts by the nationalist tradition to retrieve political control of Algerian Islamism - from both the outside and the inside - after 1990 were all defeated. The political wasteland to which Algeria has been reduced has been a function above all of these defeats of the nationalist tradition by a form of post-nationalist politics within the executive of the Algeria state which has relentlessly privileged its relations with external partners and sponsors (France, the IMF, the European Union, the Gulf states, the United States) over its relations with the Algerian people, at the expense of Algeria's national sovereignty and national unity, and all prospect of political progress towards law-bound government.

The tactic of the post-nationalist regime in Algiers today in seeking to control the religious field involves promoting the revival of the *turuq* and of maraboutism, once again with active French support, *while simultaneously importing spokesmen for the conservative and apolitical wing of Saudi Arabian Wahhabism to disqualify Islamist activists as religious as well as political deviants!*⁹⁶ This reliance on a contradictory mélange in which the politically decisive role is given to Wahhabism confirms the intellectual bankruptcy of Algeria's own religious traditions, given the eclipse of the only innovative and imaginative variant of it in the post-colonial era, that is, the revolutionary nationalist variant of Larbi Tebessi, Malek Bennabi and Houari Boumediène.

What Accounts For The Intellectual Bankruptcy Of Sunni Islam In North Africa?

Sunnism has nothing useful to say about government. It is a fundamental tenet of Sunni doctrine that Muslims should submit to and endure misgovernment by a bad Muslim ruler rather than rebel against it. Rebellion leads directly to *fitna*, dissension within the *umma*, the supreme danger, and injustice and misgovernment are preferable to anarchy. It follows that Sunni thought cannot be the basis for a critical and innovative political philosophy such as might usefully orient contemporary Muslims confronting unprecedented social dislocation and novel political dilemmas in North Africa or elsewhere. Sunni Islam in general can only be the basis for a conservative, identity-focused, authenticity-obsessed anti-Westernism, as practised by the non-*jihadi* wing of Wahhabism, or an apolitical religious quietism and mysticism, as practised by many Sufi orders, or a politically subaltern (if sometimes commercially enterprising) accommodation to Western hegemony and its local post-nationalist relays, as practised by the more prominent Algerian *turuq*.

Because of these general features of the Sunni tradition, there has been only one aspect of this tradition which has afforded any purchase for political oppositionism. This is the innovation introduced by the Hanbali jurist Taqi al-Din Ahmed Ibn Taymiyya (c. 1262-1328 C.E.) in the 6th century A.H./13th century C.E.

Ibn Taymiyya's innovation was stimulated by a very specific problem, the problem of the *yasa*, the customary law of the Mongols, the not-quite-Muslim rulers of the remains of the old Abbassid empire after the sack of Baghdad in 1258 C.E.⁹⁷ Because they were a nomadic and tribal people, the Mongols, while professing Islam, also possessed their own tribal law, the *yasa*, which, like tribal

⁹⁶ See the articles by K. Selim, 'Le Wahhabisme contre l'Islamisme algérien', *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, 27 February 2002 and Boubakeur Hamidechi, 'Un clergé sélectif et maraboutique', *Le Matin*, 18 November 2002.

⁹⁷ Ayubi (1991), pp.126-127.

law elsewhere in the Muslim world (notably amongst the Berbers of the Maghrib), was not Islamic law. The Mongols' continuing attachment to their *yasa* singled them out, however. Whereas the leaders of the great Berber-based revolutions which founded the Almoravid and Almohad empires relegated Berber customary law to the background at the outset of their ventures and made the strict application of the *Shari'a* their ideological justification, the palpable refusal of the Mongols to do likewise was problematic, indeed scandalous, to the Hanbali jurist's way of thinking. It was accordingly Ibn Taymiyya who first addressed, and offered an answer, to the tricky question of how Muslims should respond to rulers who are nominally and professedly *but not properly* Muslim.

It is this which explains Ibn Taymiyya's status today as the single most influential thinker from the post-Rashidin era of Sunni Islam and the favourite doctrinal reference for Sunni radicalism. Because, of course, his answer to the question was that good Muslims should see through the hypocritical profession of faith by such rulers, and recognise their non-Muslim character, in virtue of which rebellion against them was not merely licit but imperative, not *fitna* but *jihad*.

The immense danger and disastrous latter-day consequences of this innovation in Sunni political thought, when recycled in an unreflecting manner via the intellectual tradition, deep-rooted in the Islamic world, of reasoning by analogy (*qiyas*),⁹⁸ should now be evident. It encourages any critique of bad government to stigmatise the bad ruler as non-Muslim. And it accordingly substitutes a militant jihadist antagonism to such a government for the non-violent and constructive alternatives of *da'wa* (the proselytising mission) and *islah* (reform).

Sayyid Qutb's preoccupation with the neo-*jahiliyya* expressed his obsession with the problem of deliverance from a non- or anti-Muslim ruler. His writings say nothing about how this deliverance can be effected, and even less about what good Muslim government should consist of, other than the sovereignty of God. Since the existence of *hakimiyyat Allah* is, in practice, a function of the application of the *Shari'a*, God's law, Qutb's radicalism is in fact a radical conservatism, indeed a radical reaction.

At the same time, the Qutbist and, more generally, Salafiyyist return to the tenets of 1st A.H./7th C.E. century Islam devalues all the subsequent learning and all the authority of later intellectual developments within Islamic thought. As such, of course, it expresses the revolt of the superficially educated *profanum vulgus* against the Sunni official '*ulama*, who have nothing to offer other than the routine legitimisation of unsatisfactory governments.

As a result, all forms of radical Islamism in North Africa since the 1970s have been preoccupied with the lesser *jihad*, the armed defence of the *umma*, whether against external enemies or against internal enemies conceived as external to the true *umma* because impious. The only current of thinking in North Africa since the second world war which has been concerned with the greater *jihad*, the problem of individual and collective self-overcoming, is that associated with Algerian revolutionary nationalism and articulated in the brilliant, but terribly neglected, writings of Malek Bennabi.

The Logic Of The Re-Orientation Of Jihad: Has Qutbism Been Transcended?

Wahhabism has always had a *jihadi* – that is, a politico-military activist – wing. This initially exercised itself mainly against Ottoman power and against Shi'i rulers in north-eastern Arabia and southern Iraq. While the massive expansion of Wahhabism beyond Arabia in the 1970s - and

⁹⁸ The point is not that reasoning by analogy is wrong in itself, but that the impulse to think in this way is apt to induce the person who engages in it to make false analogies, a tendency by no means confined to Muslim thinkers of course, but particularly strongly established in the traditions of Islamic jurisprudence. For a good discussion of this, see Ayubi (1991), pp.26-27.

especially in a mixture of competition with and defensive reaction to Iran's revolutionary Shi'ism since 1978-79 - has mostly taken the peaceful form of the *da'wa* (backed by petro-dollars, of course), the *jihadi* wing was rapidly mobilised for the war in Afghanistan from the beginning of the 1980s.

The reorientation of *jihadi* Wahhabism which has taken place recently has not been a mystery and has not involved any real development of theory or doctrine. It has simply re-oriented *jihadi* energies to a new adversary, the former American ally now become the American enemy. This has no doubt been politically problematic, given the longstanding ties between Washington and Riyadh (and Islamabad), but it has not been doctrinally problematic. The premise of this reorientation has been the American decision not merely to establish a large-scale US military 'shield' in Sa'udi Arabia in 1990 but, above all, the subsequent decision to maintain this presence since the completion of Operation Desert Storm and thus convert it into what appeared until very recently to be a permanent state of affairs.

Given the special status of the Sa'udi state as 'the guardians of the two holy shrines', the American military presence has inevitably been considered by many Wahhabis – and, indeed, by many other Muslims – as a massive qualification of the religious and political legitimacy of the Sa'udi state and of its ruling family, in that they have been regarded as allowing the holiest land in the Muslim world to become a *de facto* American protectorate. Within the society of Sa'udi Arabia, the tendency to contest the legitimacy of the Sa'udi dynasty given this capitulation to America (in addition to the accumulating evidence of the moral decadence and hypocrisy of many members of the ruling family) has been especially strong among elements of the population outside the two inner circles of the régime, that is, outside not only the extensive ramifications of the House of Sa'ud but also the second circle formed by the privileged tribes of the Nejd. It is accordingly not to be wondered at that an important number of the leading activists in *jihadi* Wahhabism who have been disposed to make an issue not only of American power but equally of the legitimacy of the Sa'udi monarchy should be drawn from the peripheral regions of the country, from immigrants from Yemen (such as the Bin Laden family), from the Hijaz, which has by no means forgotten its cultural and religious traditions of the pre-Sa'udi era, and from the impoverished Asir region between Hijaz and Yemen.

In so far as the reorientation of *jihadi* Wahhabism has entailed a tendency to contest the previously unchallengeable House of Sa'ud, it has discovered a use for the doctrinal innovation of Ibn Taymiyya. This innovation was previously of little significance for Wahhabism, at any rate within Arabia, since, with its own victory in conjunction with the Sa'udi dynasty, the problem of not-quite-Muslim rule did not arise except elsewhere; it has only arisen as a problem in Sa'udi Arabia since 1990-91. But, for all the media commentary to the effect that Al-Qa'eda is as much a threat to the Sa'udi state as it is to the USA, the evidence to bear this out is conspicuous for its scarcity. (One is reminded of the longstanding insistence of British politicians and media pundits that the IRA was as much a threat to the Irish Republic as it was to the United Kingdom.)⁹⁹

It may be that a factor inhibiting *jihadi* Wahhabism from really going to war with the government in Riyadh has been the complicating effect on its outlook and agenda of the alliance it has contracted with the *jihadi* wing of Egyptian Islamism.

The reorientation of the wing of the *Al-Gihad* grouping personified by Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Mohammed Atef, and Co. has been a very different matter from whatever change has occurred in Bin Laden's outlook. The new alliance they have contracted with Bin Laden has reoriented them

⁹⁹ The recent terrorist incidents in Riyadh, which have occurred since the first several drafts of this paper were written, are evidence that this judgement may be mistaken, but not proof that it is; I remain to be convinced that Al-Qa'eda is really at war with the Sa'udi state. It should not be forgotten that a number of bombs were let off in the Irish Republic in the 1970s, but the IRA never went to war with Dublin in earnest.

from an internal enemy, the impious Egyptian state, whose president (“Pharaoh”) they assassinated in 1981, and thus from the politics of *takfir* and *fitna*- legitimised-as-*jihad*, to an external enemy which is clearly not a Muslim power. It has thus led them out of the Qutbist problematic into the simpler and doctrinally easier problematic of the lesser *jihad* as traditionally conceived since the beginning of Islam, namely the defensive war against infidel aggressors.¹⁰⁰

But this reorientation of *jihad* is still locked into the problematic of the lesser *jihad*, the war to be waged by the *umma* against those non-Muslims who attack it. This is because the Islamism which is at the origin of this outlook has reduced Islamic political thought to such a simplified set of ideas that it precludes all reflection that could lead to the successful waging of the greater *jihad* - the peaceful struggle for individual and collective self-overcoming - in the national political sphere in the shape of a movement of cultural renaissance and political reform that needs to develop if contemporary Muslim states are to become states bound by law without losing their Muslim character.

It remains to be seen whether those elements of Egyptian Islamism which have not followed Al-Zawâhiri & Co. into the revamped Al-Qa’eda will prove to have it in them to engage in a different and more fruitful reorientation of their own.¹⁰¹ Unless and until they do so, the significance of the displacement of Egyptian *jihadi* energies from the internal to the external front suggests that Qutbism has not been transcended, but at best merely abandoned, and this abandonment may prove only temporary.

Conclusion

Fountainheads revisited

Martin Indyk talks of the need to “dry up the Egyptian and Saudi swamps”.¹⁰² The idea is that the Egyptian and Saudi radical Islamists who engage in terrorism, especially those who do so as part of the Al-Qa’eda networks, are analogous to mosquitoes, and to solve the problem you must destroy their breeding grounds. This notion is wrong-headed, if not reckless and absurd, with regard to both countries.

What is wrong with this in respect of Egypt is that Egypt – like Algeria – has not functioned in the way a swamp does, because the brand of Islamism which produces terrorists such as Zawâhiri in Egypt and Antar Zouabri or Hassan Hattab in Algeria¹⁰³ is not home-grown. In both cases these brands of Islamism are importations. The swamps, on closer inspection, turn out to be vacuums which have sucked in doctrines from elsewhere.

¹⁰⁰ While Western public opinion is no doubt convinced that Al-Qa’eda is gratuitously attacking the West, it is important to insist on the fact that that, for those engaged in this *jihad*, their actions are conceived as responses to prior acts of Western and primarily American aggression, and thus *counter*-attacks.

¹⁰¹ The signs are not very promising. I explored this matter in an extended discussion with Montasser Al-Zayyat, a lawyer and former member of the radical Egyptian group *Al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya*, who has defended numerous Islamists in trials in Egypt. Following the ‘ideological revision’ or ‘self-criticism’ in which the *Gama’a* has recently engaged, in which its leaders and many members have explicitly renounced their former views, they appear, in Al-Zayyat’s estimation, to have deprived themselves of all perspectives capable of orienting their future political activity in Egypt; those who do not simply give up on activism are accordingly likely to reorient themselves to the international *jihad*, whether in Al-Qa’eda or some comparable grouping (interview, Cairo, October 5, 2003).

¹⁰² Indyk (2002), pp.80, 86.

¹⁰³ Zouabri was the most notorious leader of the Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, GIA) until his death in 2002. Hattab is the leader of the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (*Groupe Salafiste pour le Prédication et le Combat*, GSPC), which he founded in a breakaway from the GIA in September 1998.

The forms of Sunni Islam which are native to Egypt and Algeria have not produced terrorism at all. The problem is that Sunni Islam in North Africa has been eclipsed and overwhelmed by brands of militant and even virulent Islamism which originate from elsewhere.

In the Algerian case (and possibly also the cases of Tunisia and Morocco, as well as Libya), one might more accurately employ the analogy with the Hilalian invasion, the aggressive migration of Arabian tribes, the Banu Hilal and the Banu Solaïm, from Egypt to the Maghrib in the 11th century C.E., which has itself been compared with an invasion of a swarm of locusts. In short, one might argue that the ascendancy of the problematic of the new *jahiliyya* in the discourse of contemporary Maghribi Islamism has itself been a function of a new *Hilaliyya*: a form of Islamism originating, like the Banu Hilal, in central Arabia has migrated into North Africa and has been propelled out of Egypt westwards to the Maghrib at the expense of Maghribi religious traditions with, in some cases, devastating consequences.

The question, then, is why has this happened? Why could not the religious traditions, and the political traditions derived from these, which are native to Algeria and Egypt sustain themselves and retain a hegemonic status in the Algerian and Egyptian religious fields?

It is essential to appreciate this problem if one is to have any hope of seriously addressing the other programmatic suggestion floated by Indyk, namely that US policy should encourage the rulers of Egypt and Saudi Arabia (and presumably other Muslim states as well) to promote more ‘tolerant’ brands of Islam.¹⁰⁴

The swamp analogy may seem to hold up better in the Sa‘udi case. Sa‘udi Arabia is certainly the source of Wahhabism. But Wahhabism, while militant, has not been prone to engage in terrorism except in the form of its foreign derivatives, the various so-called *‘jihadi Salafi’* movements, notably in Algeria (and now Morocco) and the Al-Qa‘eda group. But the Al-Qa‘eda group is not a simple expression of Wahhabism, but of something much more specific, the anti-American wing of Wahhabism which has developed only in the last decade in reaction to American policy, above all the US military presence in Sa‘udi Arabia. Prior to this, Wahhabism was certainly engaged in vigorous proselytism but, in so far as it had aggressive political purposes, these were to destabilise regimes regarded as hostile or rivals to Sa‘udi Arabia, notably Nasser’s regime in Egypt and other nationalist regimes elsewhere. In virtually all cases, these purposes were congruent with US policy stances and objectives, and had no anti-American aspect.

It is thus US actions and policy since 1990 which have caused ‘Wahhabi’ terrorism. In this respect, Chomsky is quite right. American opinion and policymakers may understandably have been reluctant to admit this bitter truth. But the policymakers at least should have recognised that facing this truth conferred one major advantage. It meant that the US has indeed possessed the capability to address the problem; being the cause of the problem, it could if it chose become the solution of the problem, by abandoning the provocative and unnecessary bases and making other arrangements for guaranteeing the security of Gulf states friendly to the U.S. This would not have done anything about the promotion of a different, more ‘tolerant’ Islam, in Sa‘udi Arabia, but it would have removed one of the most important grounds for active anti-Americanism in Arabian Islam. But it is now too late to say this to much purpose, since Washington’s realisation that it had to abandon its bases in Saudi Arabia seems merely to have furnished it with an extra motive for its decision to destroy the Iraqi state and invest its troops and funds and prestige in the swamps of Mesopotamia, to which its occupation is now attracting *jihadi* mosquitoes from all points of the compass.

The general promotion of ‘tolerant Islam’ is a complex problem. Given the centrality of Wahhabism to the history of the Sa‘udi state, and the intrinsically intolerant nature of Wahhabism as a zealous

¹⁰⁴ Indyk (2002).

revivalist movement intent on establishing and thereafter preserving its hegemony over the religious field in Arabia, there is nothing the U.S. or the West in general can realistically hope to do in Arabia itself to promote 'tolerance' as a general characteristic of Islam in this instance, short of invading Sa'udi Arabia, overthrowing the Sa'udi state and constructing a very different régime there. There is reason to think that Indyk and his circle may indeed have been contemplating, if not actively canvassing, this scenario. But there is no reason to think that it would actually work. While American power could very probably destroy the Sa'udi state if it chose, there is absolutely no reason to think that it could destroy the Wahhabi tradition of Arabian Islam. This tradition no longer depends on the political power of the House of Sa'ud, and would be likely not only to survive the latter's demise, but become more, not less, anti-American and 'intolerant' after such a Western aggression than it is already.

There have recently been signs that under the present leadership of Crown Prince Abdallah (given the incapacitation of King Fahd), the Sa'udi government is attempting to address some of the problems which have accumulated in Sa'udi society in a new strategy combining elements of a (traditionally Wahhabi) drive against corruption, elements of liberal (or at least partially liberalising) reform and even tacit elements of the national idea. If this interesting development is disrupted or otherwise cut short, as Indyk and others who have failed (or refused) to recognise it appear to wish, 'tolerance' will have to come to Arabian Islam from elsewhere, as 'radicalism' and 'militancy' came to Algeria, from elsewhere. Some other country will have to be the setting for the development of a more tolerant Islam, and this will then have to spread across the Qur'an belt and take central Arabia in its stride.¹⁰⁵

The necessity of a revival of liberal-constitutionalist nationalism in North Africa

The vacuum into which the new *Hilaliyya* has moved was created by the discrediting and moral bankruptcy of the central traditions of Sunni Islam in North Africa. This bankruptcy was that of the 'ulama. But this should not simply be taken for granted as an accomplished fact. It is itself to be explained. And it is especially to be explained given the degree to which the Salafiyya movement in the Maghrib could be seen to be led by the 'ulama (Ben Badis in Algeria, Allal Al-Fassi in Morocco) and expressed their reassertion of their relevance and moral as well as intellectual and spiritual leadership.

They were able, especially in Algeria, to claim and hold this leadership position for as long as they were reasserting the Arab and Islamic identity of the society and conducting the onslaught on *bida* and *shirk*. Once these matters had been addressed and their point taken – which was fairly rapidly – they had nothing left in their locker, which is why some of them then sold the pass after independence and acted as facilitators of the new *Hilaliyya*, which was a suicidal thing to do.

For the 'ulama to retain credit, they had to recover their traditional role as *doctors of law*. The fundamental reason why they are bankrupt is that they lost this role during the colonial period and have never recovered it.

Under Boumediène, the national 'ulama (notably Ahmed Hamani) acted to legitimise the state's Promethean project of progressive national development while also catering – notably in the discourse and activity of Mouloud Kassim¹⁰⁶ – for the current of opinion hostile to Western decadence and trying to articulate its outlook when appropriate as a necessary tactic in order to keep it in its place and prevent it from burgeoning into a focus of opposition. The role played by Hamani,

¹⁰⁵ Before considering how 'tolerant Islam' might be promoted, and where best one might hope to promote it, it is essential to consider what we mean by 'tolerance' in this context, but that will have to be the subject of another paper.

¹⁰⁶ Minister of Religious Affairs, 1970-1979; for a discussion of the 'Campaign against the degradation of morals' which he instigated in 1970, see Roberts (2003), pp.10-11.

Kassim & Co., however purposeful and useful, could not on its own serve to re-establish the authority of the national *'ulama*, for three reasons.

First, their function was essentially to legitimate a project conceived elsewhere; they were not the main source of the thinking which informed the project, and so could take no credit for this; possessors of a very different kind of *'ilm* (expertise) - the modernist technocrats led by Boumediène's close ally, industry and energy minister Belaïd Abdesselam - were the primary source and took the credit as they later took the blame.

Second, in so far as socialism was a central element of the project, the *'ulama*, in legitimating this, were going out on a limb and exposing themselves to a counter-attack which would delegitimize them as well as the project itself, which is what happened when the dissident *'alîm*, Sheikh Abdellatif Soltani, published his diatribe against socialism in 1974;¹⁰⁷ as far as I am aware, there was no effective reply to Soltani – which is very striking and important.

Third, the project itself continued to require and presuppose a freely-acting state unbound by law. Whatever element of Boumediène's project aimed at ultimately establishing a constitutional settlement and the foundation of law-bound government was never articulated by him or anyone associated with his regime. Thus, for the duration of the project they were legitimating, the national *'ulama* were unable to recover their primary status as doctors of law.

It follows that the Promethean-Bennabist perspective of an Algerian Islam oriented by its focus on the problem of overcoming post-Almohad man can enable the national *'ulama* to recover moral and intellectual authority in the society only if it addresses the problem of how to develop the Algerian state into a state bound by law. This requires the national *'ulama* to play – and to be seen to play - a leading role in developing thought about how this is to be done, which they need to do if the necessary synthesis of Islamic and non-Islamic sources of law is to be achieved.

¹⁰⁷ Soltani's attack took the form of a tract entitled *Al-Mazdaqiyya hiya 'asl al-Ishtirakiyya* ['Mazdaqism is the source of socialism']; by 'Mazdaqism', Soltani was alluding to the doctrines of Mazdaq, the leader of a sect in Persia in the 5th century BC reputed for its communist and libertine outlook. For a discussion, see Roberts (2003), pp.13-15.

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Crisis States Programme collaborators

In India:

Asia Development Research Institute (Patna, Bihar)
NEIDS, North-East Hill University (Shillong)

In South Africa:

Wits Institute of Social & Economic Research (WISER)
Sociology of Work Workshop (SWOP)
Department of Sociology
(University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg)

In Colombia:

IEPRI, Universidad Nacional de Colombia
Universidad de los Andes
Universidad del Rosario

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- We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



Director: Dr James Putzel
Administrator: Wendy Foulds
Editorial Assistant: Jonathan Curry-Machado

Development Research Centre,
Development Studies Institute (DESTIN),
LSE, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE
Tel: +44 (0)20 7849 4631 Fax: +44 (0)20 7955 6844
e-mail: csp@lse.ac.uk

