

Colonial Education and the Printing Press: How Education and Media Boundaries Illustrated Divisions Within Algerian Nationalism in the 1930s

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Executive Summary

This research paper examines the ways in which colonial educational structures and media ecosystems contributed to ideological divergence within Algeria’s nationalist movements in the 1930s. The analysis highlights how France’s dual-track educational system—comprising Arabic religious schooling and French colonial instruction—not only stratified access to opportunity but also shaped the worldview, rhetoric, and legitimacy of competing nationalist actors. The study particularly focuses on the Ulama and the Étoile Nord-Africaine (ENA), the two most influential Algerian nationalist movements during the decade, and analyzes how their leaders’ educational backgrounds and media engagement strategies mirrored their ideological trajectories.

Utilizing a qualitative methodology grounded in primary French-language newspaper sources, Arabic reformist publications, and historical archives accessed through OCR and digital tools, the paper demonstrates that these groups’ differing attitudes toward colonial authority and national identity stemmed from their distinct educational origins. Leaders of the Ulama, such as Ibn Badis and Tayeb El Okbi, were educated in Islamic institutions in Algeria and abroad (e.g., Zitouna, Al-Azhar), grounding their activism in religious reform (Islah) and Arabic literacy. Conversely, leaders of the ENA, such as Messali Hadj and Amar Imache, emerged from the French *écoles indigènes* and were shaped by socioeconomic exclusion and labor migration to France, fostering a more confrontational, populist, and secular-nationalist orientation.

The study finds that the newspaper was not merely a communicative tool but a contested space through which ideological legitimacy was brokered. French-language newspapers such as *La Voix Indigène* and *Les Spectacles d’Alger* functioned as platforms for both integrationist and anti-colonial discourse, while Arabic-language publications aligned with the Ulama were often suppressed, reflecting the state’s attempt to control linguistic and ideological expression. Despite this, the Ulama leveraged their religious authority to circulate reformist messages within Arabic-speaking communities, often translating their articles into French to widen their influence. Meanwhile, the ENA’s secular, often leftist rhetoric found traction among disenfranchised urban workers, albeit at the cost of elite support.

A central finding of this paper is that the colonial state’s manipulation of education policy unintentionally fostered a bilingual generation of Algerian intellectuals capable of accessing both French and Arabic discourses. This dual literacy enabled ideological innovation and factionalism. Furthermore, the study

illustrates how colonial restrictions on Arabic-language education inadvertently amplified the influence of foreign Islamic institutions, particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, and the Hijaz, whose graduates returned to Algeria to challenge French hegemony from a religious framework.

In sum, this research underscores that education and print media were not neutral backdrops but central arenas in the struggle for Algerian identity and sovereignty. The legacies of these divisions—between religious reformists and political militants, Arabic and French education, insiders and outsiders—would reverberate through the independence movement and beyond, shaping the political and ideological landscape of post-colonial Algeria.