

Identity and Belonging in the Algerian National Movement: The Pro-Independence Current as a Case Study (1926-1954)

Dr. Youssef Guenfoud ¹

¹ Djilali Bounaama University, Khemis Miliana, Algeria. Email: youcefg2022@gmail.com

Received: 23/11/2025 ; Accepted : 09/05/2026 ; Published : 02/08/2026

Abstract

This study examines the place of identity and belonging in the discourse and programmes of the pro-independence current within the Algerian national movement between 1926 and 1954. It begins with a central argument. The demand for independence was not purely political. It was also linked to the construction of a cultural vision of the Algerian nation. This vision rested on the Arabic language, Islam, education, and historical memory. It also created tensions within the party, especially during the cultural and linguistic crisis of the late 1940s. The study adopts a historical and analytical approach. It examines the programmes of the North African Star, the Algerian People's Party, and the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties. It also draws on Messali Hadj's speeches, the party press, activists' testimonies, and specialised historical studies. The findings show that the pro-independence current made the defence of Arabic, Islam, and education part of its strategy of national mobilisation. This choice helped shape a unifying discourse against colonial policy. At the same time, it exposed the limits of a single conception of identity when it encountered the linguistic and cultural diversity of Algerian society. The study concludes that this current must be understood through both its political-liberation dimension and its cultural-symbolic dimension. Reductionist and justificatory readings should be avoided.

Keywords: identity; party; pro-independence current; national question; Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties.

Introduction

When France occupied Algeria, it pursued a systematic policy of violence in both the military and cultural spheres. In the cultural sphere, colonial rule sought to dismantle the foundations of national identity. It fought the Arabic language and Islam and distorted national history. It also established new cultural, linguistic, religious, and civilisational frameworks by imposing French and promoting Christianity. Almost a century of French presence was accompanied by deep cultural and identity erosion. From the 1920s onward, the pro-independence nationalist current began to emerge in response to this cultural policy.

The pro-independence current was marked by a revolutionary nationalist ideology throughout the different stages of the Algerian national movement. Yet identity and belonging remained central issues in its discourse. They were seen as essential to the completion of national unity. This current was among the movements most aware of the role of cultural questions in social cohesion and continuity. That awareness was closely linked to the party's political activity. It appeared in its programmes, speeches, and demands. These materials reflected its understanding of the national

question and of the need to preserve the cohesion and continuity of Algerian society. What position did the elite of the pro-independence current adopt toward identity and belonging? How did these issues influence, and how were they influenced by, the political questions that shaped the national movement?

1. The Cultural Background of the Pro-Independence Current

The cultural outlook of the pro-independence current rested on several basic principles. These principles formed the cultural and organisational foundations of the party from the time it emerged among emigrants as the North African Star. The current was founded through an Algerian national initiative. Under Messali Hadj's leadership, it acquired a clear religious foundation as well as a distinct national and popular character.¹ Messali's central principle was the defence of the Algerian national personality and its progress toward freedom. He affirmed that the Algerian nation had existed before colonisation and had continued to exist under colonial rule. He also stressed that Algerian workers were influenced by the spiritual authority of religious *zawiyas*. This helps explain the effect of Messalism on the cultural outlook of the pro-independence activists. Messali himself had been influenced by the Darqawiyya Sufi order, to which his family belonged.

The role of the French Communist Party in organising Algerian workers must also be considered. This role became especially important after Emir Khaled was exiled from Algeria in 1923. The party introduced many young Algerians and large groups of North African workers to ideas of nationalism and national struggle. It used the frustration that had spread among them to promote these ideas. Many historians therefore acknowledge its intellectual and ideological role in the creation of the North African Star. Communist activists also used the opportunity to offer assistance and protection to Algerian workers.

Algerian workers faced stronger pressure to join trade unions than their French counterparts. They came to believe that they needed strong and well-structured workers' organisations. This brought them into contact with labour activism. However, the ideology of the French Communist Party did not correspond to their demand for independence. For the communists, independence was only a temporary and transitional objective. It was intended to prepare the way for the social emancipation of the rural masses through an ideological struggle led by the French Communist Party.

The French Communist Party organised North African workers, especially Algerians. It promoted equality with the French and demanded better treatment for the indigenous population. These ideas were discussed at communist meetings.² The party exercised a strong intellectual influence over figures such as Hadj Ali Abdelkader. He accepted communist ideas and defended the concept of independence as a transitional stage. He also called for the emancipation of Algerian workers and an improvement in their conditions. However, the party could not control strong self-educated figures such as Messali Hadj, Amar Imache, Akli Bennoun, Abdelaziz Menouar, Ali Amara, Djilali Chebila, and others. The demands of the North African Star after its establishment

¹ Charles-André Julien, *North Africa on the Move*, Arabic trans. Monji Slim et al. (Tunis: National Publishing and Distribution Company, 1976), p. 142 [in Arabic].

² Messali Hadj, *Memoirs of Messali Hadj (1898-1938)*, trans. Mohamed El-Maaradji (Algiers: ANEP, 2007), p. 126 [in Arabic].

were not communist. Independence was stated as its primary and final goal. The issue was no longer limited to the demands of migrant workers. It concerned an entire people.

The influence of Shakib Arslan on Messali Hadj must also be recognised. The two men corresponded about culture, civilisation, and politics. These contacts helped Messali distance himself from his communist affiliation. This was also Arslan's objective. He sought to reduce communist influence over Messali and bring him closer to Arab-Islamic belonging and to the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema.

These contacts strengthened the Arab-Islamic ideological source of Algerian nationalism. They also explain Messali's emphasis on belonging to the Arab and Islamic nation. He adopted the language of Arab nationalism, Islamic unity, and Arab national consciousness. His political vocabulary consequently acquired a strong Islamic tone. He often described his party's opponents with religious terms such as "apostates," "hypocrites," and "unbelievers."

2. Expressions of Identity and Belonging in the Pro-Independence Current

2.1. The Arabic Language and Education in Party Programmes and Discourse

Most activists in the pro-independence current had been educated in French schools. The French-educated elite later formed the majority within the revolutionary leadership. Nevertheless, the defence of Arabic remained a firm intellectual conviction from the party's early years. The party regarded Arabic as one of the main components of the Algerian national personality. This position appeared in its programmes, speeches, and articles written by its leaders.

Arabic and education first appeared among the demands of the North African Star at the Brussels Congress against Colonialism and Imperialism in February 1927.³ Messali Hadj emerged as a prominent figure at this congress. The North African Star called for schools that would teach Arabic to young people.⁴ It also demanded access to education at all levels and freedom of the press, association, and assembly.⁵

The programme adopted at the party congress held in Paris on 28 May 1933 was clearer than the 1927 programme. It treated cultural matters as rights rather than as simple demands. The status of Arabic became more explicit, especially after several communists had been removed from the party. The programme also presented a definitive position on identity and language. Its first section called for "compulsory instruction in Arabic, the right of Algerians to education at all levels, and the establishment of new Arabic schools."⁶ The second section also focused on Arabic. It stated that "Arabic shall be the official language, and education in Arabic shall be free and compulsory at all levels."⁷

In the mid-1930s, Messali Hadj described his concern for Arabic and the Arabisation of his party in the following terms: "At that time, we realised that we needed to speak our Arabic language properly. As soon as we settled on Rue Daguerre, we began to Arabise our party. At our

³ Abdelhamid Zouzou, *Migration and Its Role in the Algerian National Movement between the Two World Wars (1919-1939)* (Algiers: National Book Enterprise, 1985), p. 71 [in Arabic].

⁴ Mahfoud Kaddache, *Histoire du nationalisme algérien*, vol. 2 (Algiers: SNED, 1980), p. 909.

⁵ Zouzou, *Migration and Its Role*, p. 71.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁷ *Ibid.*

regular and political meetings, I spoke in both Arabic and French. In all our activities, we returned to the invigorating source of our historical past. Our membership cards, letterheads, newspaper *Al-Umma*, and leaflets all carried Arabic writing. At times, they also included a Qur'anic verse calling on Muslims to unite and act.”⁸

Attachment to Arabic was also evident among some party activists from Kabylia. Hocine Aït Ahmed referred to this point. Some activists learned Arabic through self-study. They included Mohamed Seghir Feradj from Tizi Ouzou and Mohamed Zeroual from Dellys. Zeroual made a particular effort to deliver his speeches in standard Arabic.⁹

In February 1936, the party presented a joint programme with Tunisia and Morocco.¹⁰ It contained immediate demands that focused on compulsory education and its improvement. The social demands related to education were as follows:¹¹

- Free and compulsory primary education.
- Expansion of secondary education.
- Access to higher education for all, with scholarships and incentives awarded on merit.
- Compulsory teaching of Arabic at all levels.

The party therefore maintained its demand for free and compulsory Arabic-language education for the indigenous population. This was intended to help Algerians escape illiteracy. It also called for the expansion of secondary education. Merit received particular emphasis because Algerian pupils often outperformed their French counterparts despite difficult conditions.

The party faced harassment and was dissolved in 1937. Even so, the newly established Algerian People's Party remained committed to the national demands approved by the general congress of 23-24 August 1938. These demands included official recognition of Arabic and complete freedom for independent education. The party called for a broad programme to build educational institutions. It also demanded a decree that would make Arabic compulsory at every level, as in Morocco, Tunisia, and the Arab East. It proposed the creation of a Faculty of Arabic Literature at the University of Algiers. The faculty would teach Arabic language and literature, history, sociology, and Islamic philosophy. The party also sought to raise Islamic secondary schools to university status. Algerian professors would teach there in Arabic.¹²

⁸ Messali Hadj, *Memoirs*, p. 160.

⁹ Hocine Aït Ahmed, *Mémoires d'un combattant: L'esprit d'indépendance (1942-1952)* (Paris: Éditions Sylvie Messinger, 1983), pp. 25-27.

¹⁰ The 1936 programme of the pro-independence current was more detailed. In its treatment of the cultural question, it stressed the party's Maghrebi dimension. It demanded, for example, the repeal of the Berber Dahir in Morocco, which had created linguistic and historical divisions between Arabs and Berbers. It also opposed measures that facilitated assimilation in those regions. In addition, it called for freedom of opinion and freedom of political activity through public meetings and the press. See Salwa al-Hilali, "The Cultural Question in the Literature of the Algerian National Movement (1919-1954)" (PhD diss., Department of History, University of Algiers 2, 2016-2017), p. 196 [in Arabic].

¹¹ Zouzou, *Migration and Its Role*, pp. 190-191.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 198.

On 27 September 1937, Messali Hadj sent a message of tribute to *Al-Sha'b*, the Arabic-language newspaper published by the party.¹³ He celebrated its appearance in these words: “The Algerian people have shown their urgent need for the Arabic language, the symbol of their glory and pride and the language of their fathers and ancestors. I salute this enduring development and the great efforts made to learn the language, preserve it, and appreciate its depth. Language is the nation. A nation without a language has no dignity.”¹⁴

The cultural demands of the pro-independence current and Messali’s writings on Arabic reflected a cultural revolution. They expressed a desire to preserve the foundations of identity, especially Islam and Arabic. *Al-Umma* adopted the same idea as the party’s cultural programme: “Algeria draws its strength from more than six million people who speak the same language, follow the same religion, and share the same history.”¹⁵ The party also sought to support and defend Algeria’s cultural elites. It viewed them as the group most capable of defending the decisive interests of the Algerian people. Their level of education allowed them to make an important contribution to the country.

The composition of the pro-independence current also changed. French-educated graduates of schools and universities entered the party. Before this change, its membership had consisted mainly of agricultural labourers and members of the working class. About 23 percent of the new group had graduated from French schools. By contrast, only 1 percent had studied at al-Azhar or al-Zaytuna. Large landowners also entered the party. This new social composition would shape a new stage in its development.¹⁶

Despite these changes, the party’s national, nationalist, and religious principles remained stable. At the time of its establishment, the cultural programme of the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties included the following points:¹⁷

- Disseminating Algerian national culture.
- Granting Arabic official status and making its teaching compulsory.
- Establishing schools for all Algerian children.
- Combating illiteracy through modern methods of basic education throughout Algeria.
- Encouraging private initiatives in the cultural and social fields.

The Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties also raised and defended several cultural issues in the Algerian Assembly. Ahmed Bouda stood as the movement’s representative in the Assembly elections of April 1948.¹⁸ He placed the question of Arabic before both the nationalist

¹³ The first issue appeared on 27 August 1937 but was not released to the public until 2 September. Its masthead carried the phrase “Voice of the National Movement in Arab Muslim Algeria.” The colonial administration suspended it immediately after its second issue. See Mahfoud Kaddache and Mohamed Guenaneche, *The Algerian People’s Party (1937-1939): Documents and Testimonies for the Study of the Algerian Nationalist Current*, trans. Khalil Oudhainia (Algiers: Office of University Publications, 2013), p. 173 [in Arabic].

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁵ Al-Hilali, “The Cultural Question,” p. 199.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Benjamin Stora, *Dictionnaire biographique de militants nationalistes algériens (1926-1954)* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1985), pp. 275-276.

deputies and the representatives of the colonial administration. His interventions in Arabic attracted wide attention. At times, the official recorder deliberately omitted the statements that Bouda delivered in Arabic. On other occasions, he was stopped before completing his intervention. Most of his statements were not translated in the *Official Journal*.¹⁹

Another major issue raised by Bouda was the separation of religion and the state. His speeches condemned a policy that had made Islam appear foreign in its own homeland. In 1950, the president of the Assembly prohibited him from making further interventions. The stated reason was that he was creating disorder. On some occasions, French representatives forcibly removed him from the speaker's platform.²⁰

The Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties proposed applying the French educational curriculum to Algerians on the basis of equality with Europeans. It also called for teaching methods that respected Islamic customs. These methods would begin in Qur'anic schools and continue until a college or institute of advanced Islamic studies could be created.²¹ At the beginning of 1950, the movement defined an educational approach for Algeria. It was based on the customs, traditions, and Arab-Islamic culture of Algerian society.²²

The movement's second congress was held in Algiers from 4 to 6 April 1953. It adopted a list of demands divided into four sections. The second section addressed weaknesses within the party. In the cultural field, it called for "the dissemination of national culture, which is closely connected to Arab-Islamic culture, the expansion of vocational education, and the struggle against illiteracy."²³

2.2. Islam in the Outlook of the Pro-Independence Activists

Messali Hadj's political positions were influenced by his religious background. During childhood, he received a religious education in Tlemcen.²⁴ He attended an Arabic Qur'anic school at the Sidi al-Wazzan Mosque. He later studied at the zawiya of Hadj Mohamed Ben Yelles, which belonged to the Darqawiyya order followed by his family. In his view, Islam "is not only a religion; it governs the life of every Muslim." This religious socialisation helped shape his different political positions.²⁵

Messali's political language was also closely linked to Islam. He often described his party's opponents through terms drawn from Islamic law. In February 1934, for example, he called the representatives of the French administration "apostates" while opposing Algerian representation in the French Parliament. Activists in the pro-independence current also used Islamic language in

¹⁹ Journal officiel de l'Algérie, Débats, extraordinary session, January-February 1950, pp. 80-88.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 80-88.

²¹ Al-Hilali, "The Cultural Question," p. 208.

²² Ibid.

²³ Yahia Bouaziz, The Political Ideologies of the Algerian National Movement through Three Algerian Documents (Algiers: Office of University Publications, n.d.), p. 99 [in Arabic].

²⁴ Messali Hadj, Memoirs, p. 12.

²⁵ Ibid.

conflicts with their opponents. They accused Ferhat Abbas and his supporters of “secularism.” They also used slogans such as “Whoever votes has disbelieved” as part of their electoral boycott.²⁶

By comparison, leaders of some other nationalist tendencies faced public criticism because their conduct was seen as inconsistent with Islamic teachings. This may have weakened their influence. Messali’s attachment to Islam as an ideological foundation went beyond outward signs such as his beard, djellaba, and chechia. It served a political purpose, which he expressed in his party programmes.

The party’s commitment to an Islamic frame of reference was also visible in its slogans. Activists and supporters repeated them throughout the party’s development. One of the most important was “Long live Islam.” The slogan indicated that the party viewed Islam as a major force for liberation from French colonialism. The party also demanded the preservation of Islamic law in matters of personal status.²⁷

The Islamic dimension also appeared in the party press. The newspaper *Al-Umma* took its name from a concept of unity and collective strength. The term was drawn from the Qur’anic verse, “Indeed, this community of yours is one community” (Qur’an 21:92). The slogan of *Al-Sha’b* also expressed the party’s Islamic orientation: “The will of the people comes from the will of the nation, and the will of God cannot be resisted.” *Al-Barlaman* was published in French, but it used another Qur’anic verse as its slogan: “Hold firmly to the rope of God all together and do not become divided” (Qur’an 3:103). These and other slogans in the party press showed its adherence to Islamic principles as a foundation for success.

The party also sought to educate its activists according to what it regarded as sound Islamic principles. Its theoretical position held that activists should be formed in accordance with Islam. The ideal activist was a believer with a strong personality. Such a person could withstand obstacles and difficult tests.

At the beginning of the party crisis in the 1950s, the leadership attempted to address the situation through several measures. One of them was a specific educational programme for members of the Special Organisation (OS). The programme included the following elements:

- Moral education that combined belief, politics, and ethics. It was intended to prepare activists to assume their responsibilities. The training was to proceed quickly and remain suited to each activist’s intellectual level. Its purpose was to present the activist as a model for the wider popular classes.
- A strong emphasis on Islam in ideological training. This was intended to protect activists from deviation. Recruits were required to observe Islamic rules. They received lessons on jihad, patience, and faith. In a mosque, they swore on the Qur’an that they would not betray the organisation or reveal its secrets, even under threat of death.
- Study of Algerian history from antiquity and of the major popular resistance movements.

The party’s emphasis on Arabic, education, and the struggle against illiteracy reflected its cultural and educational objectives. The same was true of its moral training and its teaching of religious

²⁶ Rabah Lounici, *Intellectual Currents in Contemporary Algeria: Agreement and Disagreement (1920-1954)* (Algiers: Dar Kawkab al-Ulum, 2012), p. 402 [in Arabic].

²⁷ Benjamin Stora, *Les Immigrés Algériens en France: Une histoire politique, 1912-1962* (Paris: Fayard), p. 112.

and historical principles. Although independence remained its primary concern, the party also outlined the cultural and ideological features of the future state. This orientation extended back to the earliest nucleus of the organisation.

2.3. The Cultural and Linguistic Crisis within the Pro-Independence Party

The Berberist tendency first appeared within the party in France and later in Algeria. It developed as a political movement after the events of 8 May 1945. According to the party's interpretation, it took the form of a sectional campaign aimed at subversion and open rebellion against the organisation.²⁸ Some young activists in the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties held an ideology that differed from the principles of the national movement. They promoted a Berber identity for Algeria and rejected Algeria's Arab-Islamic affiliation. This position had a strong influence among French-educated students who had limited exposure to Arab-Islamic national culture.²⁹

The arrival of French-educated intellectuals had a major effect on the party's direction. This new generation sought to displace the older generation. It believed that the older leaders had failed to realise the revolutionary ideas proclaimed since the 1920s. From the party's first congress in 1947, these new activists contributed to a severe cultural crisis. It became known as the Berberist crisis or the Arab-Berber conflict. The crisis reached its height in 1949.

The Berberist crisis was regarded as one of the developments that prepared the way for the larger party crisis of 1953. It had a deep effect on the national movement because it concerned a central question: identity.³⁰ The colonial administration understood the important role of Arabic and Islam in the national cause. The article argues that, immediately after the uprising of 8 May, the administration selected several people who had absorbed Western culture and rejected Arab-Islamic civilisation. It then encouraged them to enter the pro-independence party and weaken it from within.³¹ The aim was to create an ethnic division between Arabs and Berbers on ideological, linguistic, and cultural grounds.³²

Some accounts link the crisis to the election of Rachid Ali Yahia³³ as head of the French Federation of the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties at its November 1948 congress. He received the support of Ouali Bennai and Amar Ould Hamouda, two leading figures

²⁸ Yahia Bouaziz, *The Political Ideologies of the Algerian National Movement*, p. 92 [in Arabic].

²⁹ Ahmed Ben Naaman, *France and the Berberist Thesis*, 2nd ed. (Algiers: Dar al-Umma, 1997), pp. 27-28 [in Arabic].

³⁰ Mohammed Harbi, *The National Liberation Front: Myth and Reality* (Algiers: Arab Research Foundation, 1983), p. 620 [in Arabic].

³¹ Mohamed Larbi Zoubiri, *Contemporary History of Algeria*, vol. 1 (Damascus: Arab Writers Union Publications, 1999), pp. 166-167 [in Arabic].

³² Amar Ouzegane, "Le Berbérisme: Doctrine réactionnaire de division impérialiste," *Le Jeune Musulman*, no. 1, 6 June 1952.

³³ His full name was Mohand Saïd Ali, and he was known as Rachid. The source states that he had received an education in a Christian church and was known for positions hostile to Arabism. The November 1948 congress elected him to the federal committee. He then moved toward the creation of a popular Berber movement, described as a "Berber People's Party," and entered into a direct confrontation with the leadership of the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties. See Harbi, *The National Liberation Front*, p. 64 [in Arabic].

in the Berberist current. They advanced arguments about identity and the nature of the Algerian state.³⁴

Other prominent advocates of the Berberist current included Ali Aimeche and Hocine Aït Ahmed, who had studied at the Ben Aknoun secondary school. Omar Oussedik was a student at the teacher-training institute in Bouzaréah. Mabrouk Belhocine, Yahia Henine, and Sadek Hadjerès were students at the University of Algiers. Saïd Abouzar, Belaïd Aït Medri, and others were also associated with this current.³⁵

The advocates of the Berberist tendency had received an almost entirely French education. They generally spoke Kabyle only within their families and had little knowledge of the foundations of Arab-Islamic culture. This made it easier for hostility toward Arabism to develop into hostility toward Islam. Several studies also link the spread of Berberism to the large migration of workers from Kabylia to France. They further connect it to opposition to the control and dominance of the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties.³⁶

One of the main cultural causes of the Berberist crisis was the claim that Algeria was not exclusively Arab. Supporters of this view argued that they had the right to make their voices heard on an equal basis with Arabs.³⁷ They also sought to give the Berber question a documented linguistic basis.³⁸ In their view, defining the Algerian nation only through Arabic and Islam was an excessive simplification.³⁹

In general, the Berberist current was more firmly rooted in areas where Berber identity had become a major issue.⁴⁰ This raised several questions. What form of nationalism could liberate Algeria? With which allies should that liberation be pursued? The position that emerged supported the thesis of “Algeria is Algerian” and rejected the thesis of an Arab-Islamic Algeria.⁴¹

One expression of the crisis appeared after Rachid Ali Yahia was elected to the leadership of the party’s French Federation in November 1948. Together with Ouali Bennai and Amar Ould Hamouda, he sought to establish a popular Berber movement. Their supporters entered into a direct confrontation with the leadership of the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties. Of

³⁴ Together with activists such as Ali Aimeche and Hocine Aït Ahmed, these figures devoted themselves to studying Berber history and the Berber past, drawing on Latin theorists. Their interpretation, which was marked by hostility toward Arabs, claimed that the inhabitants of Kabylia were of European and Roman origin. They based this claim on supposed biological characteristics. The source regarded this as evidence that the cultural crisis had been engineered by the colonial administration through a policy of “divide and rule.” See Souad Yamina Chebout, “The Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties: From Crisis to Rupture,” *Al-Maarif Journal for Historical Research and Studies* 2, no. 5 (17 November 2016): 157-158 [in Arabic].

³⁵ Yahia Bouaziz, *Colonial Policy through the Publications of the Algerian People’s Party* (Algiers: Dar al-Basair, 2009), p. 45 [in Arabic].

³⁶ Benyoucef Ben Khedda, *The Roots of 1 November 1954*, trans. Messaoud Hadj Messaoud, 2nd ed. (Algiers: Dar al-Chatibia, 2012), p. 240 [in Arabic].

³⁷ Archives nationales d’outre-mer (ANOM), Gouvernement général de l’Algérie, 40G/73, “Dossier PPA Berbérisme.”

³⁸ Harbi, *The National Liberation Front*, p. 62.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

the thirty-two members of the federal committee, twenty-eight rejected the idea of an Arab-Islamic Algeria. They supported the formula “Algeria is Algerian.”⁴²

Kabyle leaders in France also opposed the party’s interpretation of Algerian history and the national question. They expressed their position in the federation’s newspaper, *L’Étoile Algérienne*, which they controlled. Rachid Ali Yahia declared: “Algeria is not Arab; it is Algerian.” He called for an Algerian Algeria composed of Arab, Berber, and Turkish elements.⁴³

This opposition responded to an appeal that Messali Hadj had addressed to the United Nations in September 1948. In that appeal, he traced Algerian history to the Arab conquest. He also declared that Algeria was an integral part of the Arab world and the Arab Maghreb. Messali’s thinking gave a central place to Arabism, Islam, and Algeria’s linguistic and cultural characteristics. Supporters of the Berberist position were also disturbed by the party literature’s emphasis on Algeria’s Islamic historical roots and its neglect of the pre-Islamic period. This produced a direct conflict between Arab-Islamic and Berber conceptions of identity.⁴⁴

Advocates of this tendency used the slogan “Algeria is Algerian” as an alternative to “Arab Algeria.” The article interprets this slogan as a means of concealing political aims that sought to erase the Arab-Islamic foundations of the Algerian nation.⁴⁵ The crisis intensified when the party launched a fundraising campaign for Palestine. Rachid Ali Yahia and his supporters strongly opposed the campaign. The conflict soon moved from the defence of Berber particularity to hostility toward everything Arab.⁴⁶ Extremism then began to feed further extremism.⁴⁷

Supporters of the Berberist tendency appeared to fear that the Algerian nation might be represented in two separate forms: an Arab-Islamic form and a Berber form. They therefore preferred the formula “Algeria is Algerian.” This position rejected Arabic and Islam as the defining elements of national identity and proposed other frameworks. Their rejection of Arabic as the sole language of identity rested on a different understanding of linguistic diversity. They believed that diversity was not a threat because Algerian society consisted of both Arab and Berber components.

Hocine Aït Ahmed explained the outbreak of the crisis by pointing to the leadership’s refusal to open a broad debate on Algerian identity. He argued that the leadership had reduced identity to its Arab-Islamic dimension. He also denied the existence of a Berberist conspiracy against the party, as Messali believed.⁴⁸ Aït Ahmed gave several reasons for refusing to condemn his comrades who had demanded a debate on Berber culture:⁴⁹

- No conspiracy existed in the first place.
- The crisis resulted from the leadership’s refusal to discuss a fundamental question for the party.

⁴² Azzedine Boumezou, “Mustapha Lacheraf and the Algerian Revolution (1917-2007)” (PhD diss., Abdelhamid Mehri University, Constantine, 2017-2018), p. 172 [in Arabic].

⁴³ Benjamin Stora, *Histoire contemporaine, 1830-1988* (Algiers: Casbah Éditions, 2004), p. 108.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ben Khedda, *The Roots of 1 November 1954*, p. 246.

⁴⁶ Ben Naaman, *France and the Berberist Thesis*, p. 37.

⁴⁷ Harbi, *The National Liberation Front*, pp. 64-65.

⁴⁸ Hocine Aït Ahmed, *Mémoires d’un combattant*, p. 192.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

- He shared his comrades' position on the Amazigh language and culture.
- The crisis could have been contained in a way that served both the party and the nation, but the leadership chose repression.

The article presents the limited influence of this ideology among the wider population of Kabylia as a positive development. Most inhabitants of the region remained strongly influenced by the religious spirit promoted by the zawiyas, which defended Islam and Arabic. The Berberist current affected some members of the political organisation and the Special Organisation. The party therefore excluded activists whom it regarded as impossible to reconcile with its position.⁵⁰ Aït Ahmed was among them. He was removed from the leadership of the Special Organisation in December 1949.⁵¹ Although the advocates of Berberism remained committed to their identity claims and sought to influence the party's cultural choices, they represented a small group when compared with the nationalist majority from Kabylia.⁵²

As part of its response, the party leadership dissolved the French Federation in July 1949.⁵³ It assigned several figures from Kabylia to restore control. They included Radjef Belkacem, Captain Sadok Saïdi, and Dr Chawki Mostefaï. The decision produced the following results:⁵⁴

- The federal committee was dissolved and replaced by a temporary executive committee headed by Radjef Belkacem.
- Opponents who supported Berberist ideas were expelled.
- *L'Étoile Algérienne* was suspended.
- Propaganda activities were intensified to recover branches, local sections, and activists and to counter the opposition.

The Berberist question had serious consequences for the party. It also affected the structure and ideology of the French Federation, which lost its autonomy. Its leaders were now appointed rather than elected. The crisis generated other basic disagreements that later affected the party's organisation. The branches of the Special Organisation in Kabylia were dissolved, and Ahmed Ben Bella replaced Aït Ahmed as head of the Special Organisation.⁵⁵

From another perspective, the crisis demonstrated the party's organisational cohesion and the level of political awareness among its activists and officials. The leadership adopted what it regarded as the measures required by the situation and expelled the advocates of the Berberist tendency. It believed that Berberism could remain a weapon in the hands of colonialism as long as colonial rule continued.⁵⁶ In the party's view, the activists' response was appropriate and decisive

⁵⁰ Ben Khedda, *The Roots* of 1 November 1954, p. 254.

⁵¹ Aït Ahmed states that his firm position on Berber culture led to indirect punishment. He was no longer invited to meetings of the Political Bureau, the Central Committee, or the leadership of the Special Organisation. He received no formal decision from the disciplinary committee. He later learned by chance that the party's Political Bureau had removed him from the leadership of the Special Organisation. See Aït Ahmed, *Mémoires d'un combattant*, p. 192.

⁵² Al-Hilali, "The Cultural Question," p. 217.

⁵³ Harbi, *The National Liberation Front*, p. 65.

⁵⁴ Boumezou, "Mustapha Lacheraf and the Algerian Revolution," pp. 173-174.

⁵⁵ Stora, *Les Immigrés Algériens en France*, p. 109.

⁵⁶ Bouaziz, *The Political Ideologies of the Algerian National Movement*, p. 92.

once the actions directed against the organisation had been exposed.⁵⁷ The leadership considered the conspiracy eliminated and its effects removed by the end of 1949. During the following year, the party adopted a new approach in France. It focused on explaining the Algerian national cause to the French public and exposing colonial policy.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The groups that influenced the direction of the pro-independence current changed during its political development. At first, many party members had belonged to French communist organisations. Their ideas therefore focused on labour and social questions. From the 1930s onward, however, an Islamic orientation became increasingly dominant. This shift resulted from the arrival of new members with Islamic views. It also reflected the influence of Messali Hadj, whose outlook was shaped by Sufism. Shakib Arslan also played an important role by stressing the value of Islam in the struggle against colonialism.

The elite of the pro-independence current gave priority to independence and political struggle. They believed that independence would make it possible to address belonging, preserve identity, and protect the foundations of the national personality after the establishment of the national state. They nevertheless devoted considerable attention to these questions. They treated Algeria as an Arab-Islamic nation with distinct characteristics that shaped its personality. Islam, Arabic, education, and the struggle against illiteracy were permanent elements of the party's national activism. The strong emphasis on these elements also contributed to a cultural crisis within the party. That crisis created divisions within the revolutionary leadership. It continued until the outbreak of the revolution and contributed to a decline in Islamic influence during that phase. Despite these tensions, the party's commitment to these questions remained clear in its different programmes.

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⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 150.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

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