The Politics of Assimilation, Muslims and the Anti-republican Right in 1930’s Algeria

Cliff Haley

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Approved by:

Donald M. Reid
Lloyd S. Kramer
Lisa A. Lindsay
Abstract

Cliff Haley: The Politics of Assimilation, Muslims and the Anti-republican Right in 1930’s Algeria
(Under the direction of Donald M. Reid)

The history of indigenous politics in 1930’s Algeria has been written with an eye towards uncovering the origins of Algerian nationalism. While historians of the period have been forced occasionally to confront the evidence of Muslim attraction to extreme right politics, they have not considered the possibility that dissatisfied Muslims could have been so discouraged by the policies and practices of the French Republic as to pursue a radical anti-republican agenda. European political parties on the extreme right guided Muslim politicians in this anti-republican strategy. The well-known histories of Algeria have never taken seriously the anti-republican politics of Algerian Muslim and have thus not acknowledged cooperation between Muslims and European political right.
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Introduction

The widely accepted histories of Algeria have been written by moderate republican, Socialist, and Communist historians susceptible to a certain historiographic blind spot. A commitment to republicanism shared by these historians leaves no place for an account which takes seriously cooperation between the French anti-republican right and Muslim Algerian politicians. In the 1930s, many French expressed frustration with the government in new ways through creation of anti-republican parties in France and in Algeria. If we could allow for the possibility that Muslims might express themselves similarly, we will reach a new understanding of Algerian politics in the 1930s and its relationship to the origins of Algerian nationalism.

Following the outbreak of the Algerian War in 1954, moderate and liberal historians rewrote the history of Algeria to provide an understanding of the demands for independence made by Algerian rebels. Charles-André Julien and Charles-Robert Ageron, recognized as the preeminent French historians of Algeria by wartime and postwar generations and each dedicated to a model of republican equality, placed exploitation of Muslim victims at the heart of the conflict and established a new model for historical interpretations of Algeria.

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under colonial rule. Julien, Ageron and other historians, many of them personally involved in the history they were writing, interpreted the Algerian War as the struggle of Muslims desperate for the republican freedoms denied to them by generations of exploitative colonists. These historians had always understood the extreme right in Algeria to be anti-republican. Writing from a perspective in the 1950s, these authors further associated racial discrimination perpetuated by the colons with the same lack of respect for republican rights that characterized the Nazi occupation of France. The conduct of the Algerian War from 1954 to 1962, and the racism of the colons, led to further comparisons of supporters of French Algeria to anti-republican fascists. After the war, hundreds of thousands of repatriated French Algerians would swell the ranks of the far right Front National, and the association between a racist colonial regime and the anti-republican right became firmly established in general French discourse.

The historical model established under Ageron and Julien interpret the Algerian War as a fight over republican liberties, and thus, the scholarship following the outbreak of war in 1954 has not been able to explain why Muslim Algerians would ever knowingly associate with men hostile to the very idea of a liberal republic. While historians have been forced occasionally to confront the evidence of Muslim attraction to extreme right wing politics, they have not considered the possibility that dissatisfied Muslims could have been so discouraged by the policies and practices of the French Republic as to pursue an anti-republican agenda. The trauma of collaboration by the anti-republican Vichy regime during the Second World War led historians dedicated to the French republican tradition to consider unthinkable the notion that any anti-republican right offered a viable political alternative in Algeria. Rather, they have interpreted those Muslims favoring the anti-republican right as
they would understand their European compatriots seduced by the same ideas, solely as
opportunists, as anti-Semites, or perhaps worst of all, as dupes.

1930: The Centenary of French Algeria

The history of the first hundred years of French occupation of Algeria is characterized
by the process of transforming Algeria from an European settlement in North Africa to a
French territory of three départements, like those in France across the Mediterranean. After
1871, a civilian government responsible directly to the Department of the Interior in Paris
governed the territory in place of a military occupation and administrators undertook to
transform the land and the people of Algeria into an extension of France.² An essential part
of this process was the civic conversion of the non-French population of European origin
living in Algeria—Maltese traders, Italian fishermen and Spanish laborers—to French
citizens. This civic conversion is interpreted by John Ruedy as a practical decision to unite a
sizable European population under the French flag to stand as a bulwark against the Muslims
of Algeria and other European powers looking to settle in North Africa. However, this
attempt to remake Algeria in the image of France also conforms to the predominant colonial
ideology of France, the mission civilisatrice.³ The colonial philosophy of the French Third
Republic guaranteed that any person demonstrating an advanced degree of “civilization”
would be considered as an equal and made a French citizen. The colonial extension of this
mission deemed that colonized people, desirous of integration with France, would acquire the

²Algeria was also alternately placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of War, or a Ministry of Colonies, but
the Interior Ministry was the preferred choice for those wishing for integration of Algeria with France.
Seemingly most Muslims preferred the military administration to the civilian regime and the change in 1871 has
been considered as one of the factors leading to a widespread insurrection in the 1870s. John Ruedy, Modern

³For the evolution of this philosophy and its importance to the Republic see Alice L. Conklin, A Mission to
1997). Though Conklin is primarily focused on West Africa, the mission civilisatrice also had relevance in
North Africa.
needed civilization by adopting French cultural norms. Once demonstrating the requisite level of civilization, they would be made citizens. In 1870s Algeria, this logic was displayed with the 1871 Crémieux decree that naturalized the Jews of Algeria. Though inhabitants of Algeria centuries before the French invasion of 1830, Algerian Jews, through comparison with French Jews, were judged as being adequately civilized, and thus made citizens of the Republic. Equality of citizenship and the ensuing benefits of French civilization are two of the ideological pillars upon which the French republican model is based. The application of these principles in Algeria succeeded in transforming an overseas colony into an integral part of France and served as an example of successful republican colonization with one caveat, the advantages of republican assimilation were never successfully extended to the Muslims of Algeria.

According to the Republic oriented histories of Algeria by Ageron and Julien, the major political event of the 1930s was the debate over the Viollette project, a legal reform that would have granted 30,000 Algerian Muslims voting status equal to that accorded to all French males. In May 1936, a coalition of left and moderate parties defeated the right in elections in France. This “Popular Front” was elected in response to increasing anxiety over fascism in Europe, but its victory also promised a wave of changes for France and Algeria. For Algeria, the Viollette project was the newly elected Popular Front government’s attempt to extend the principle of the republican civilizing mission and end the status of legal inferiority obstructing Muslims’ ability to participate in republican democracy. The measure

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Ageron concludes his second section of *Histoire de l’Algérie contemporaine* with the collapse of the Muslim Congress and the abandonment of the Viollette bill, pp. 433-464. Mahfoud Kaddache also discusses the Viollette project but endeavors to fill in the gaps left by the historiography of Algeria which is dominated by authors of European origin. Kaddache’s primary focus regarding political development is the ENA and Messali Hadj. *Histoire du Nationalisme Algérien* (Paris: Paris-Méditerranée, 1980).
intended to extend citizenship to Muslims with 15 years of military service, secondary diplomas, or government citations for military or civic service. The measure would also make citizens of Muslim government functionaries and elected officials. When, in December 1936, the government announced that the project would be considered for approval, Muslim politicians and social elites, those principally affected by the proposed legislation, called for a Muslim Congress to support the project and campaign for its implementation. The Muslim Congress support for the government’s legislation was not rewarded, as the bill stalled in the Senate and the reform was abandoned.

Despite the failure of the Viollette project, the Muslim Congress is considered by mainstream histories to be an early example of Algerian unity and precursor to popular nationalism. The authors of these histories lament what they interpret as a failure by the Republic to include Muslims. Despite his criticism of Ageron and Julien, Jean-Claude Vatin confirms this interpretation. He states that shock of this experience irreparably damaged the European liberals and Muslim partisans of assimilation, leading to a turn to extremism.

These histories, with their interpretation of the Viollette project as a failure of the Popular Front, assume that Muslim leadership was desirous of republican assimilation. While the Muslim Congress did at one point unite a diverse range of interests behind the idea of integration with the Republic, the standard interpretations of the Viollette drama conflate Muslim support of the Popular Front government with faith in republican assimilation. Yet, both before and after the support professed by the Muslim Congress for the government of

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5 The eventual law proposed would grant citizenship for around 30,000 Muslims, meaning that Muslims meeting a range of possible criteria; including possession of a school diploma, an honorable discharge as a non commissioned officer from the military, a military decoration, or a pension for state service, would be considered a French citizen, Mahfoud Kaddache, *Histoire du Nationalisme Algérien* (Paris: Paris-Méditerranée), 407.

the Republic, members of the Congress advocated anti-assimilation philosophies and strongly criticized the republican model of integration.

While Muslims may not have refused a republican model of politics, they did reject the model of assimilation associated with the republican government. Their allies in this struggle both before and after the Muslim Congress were the anti-republican parties of the European settlers. These groups shared an ideological foundation in political movements that for one reason or another rejected the Republic, often over religious objections to the secularism of the French Republic or a commitment to an authoritarian monarchy. These anti-republican groups, often, though not always, employed a strategy of popular anti-Semitism to promote their campaigns. As enthusiasm for authoritarian government grew following the rise of fascist regimes in Italy and Germany, these anti-republicans organized new political parties. Two of these new parties, the Croix de Feu and the Parti Populaire Français, spread to Algeria and developed important followings among both the European settlers and Muslim Algerians, while Action Française, a royalist organization focused around the newspaper of the same name, reached a new audience in Muslim politicians.³

Sources

Much of our information on Muslim political attitudes comes to us from the Muslim press which was printed and distributed primarily in the urban centers of Algiers and Constantine. These weekly and monthly papers, published in French in order to evade the strict censorship of Arabic language press, reached only the tiny minority of Muslims literate

in French. Though many newspapers started and failed within one year, four of the Muslim papers printed in French achieved stability: *La Défense*, *La Justice*, *L’Entente Franco-Musulmane* and *La Voix Indigène*.8 This press was the principle method of communication among urban elites educated in French schools and in religious centers located in Tunisia and Egypt. Members of a federation of elected representatives, known as the Élus, and the Society of Ulemas, religious scholars inspired by Wahabist doctrine, formed the core of the Algerian intelligentsia.9 While these two groups sparred over the proper degree of assimilation into French cultural norms, each strived for acceptance by the French. The Ulemas campaigned for state sponsored bilingual education and official recognition of Islamic cultural practices; the Élus, as urban professionals, sought an end to official and unofficial barriers to Muslim advancement. This Muslim press has been of interest to historians as they provide an insight into political groups interested in dialoging with the state and consequently those seeking entry to the Republic.

The limited scope of these sources leads one to believe that all Muslims sought, to one degree or another, acceptance by the French Republic. The only active political group employing the press with an anti-inclusion philosophy was the *Étoile Nord Africaine* founded by Algerian workers in Paris. Its leader, Messali Hadj, rejected French domination over Algeria and advocated alternately for independence or autonomy. Sources outside the press tell a story different than the struggle for acceptance recorded in the Muslim press. Police

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8Two other newspapers deserve mention. *La Lutte Sociale* was the Algerian Communist paper which was reviewed by the Indigenous Affairs office despite its European ownership and direction. It published bi-lingual editions and employed numerous Muslim authors. Also, *El Ouma* was the ENA/PPA press originating in Paris. This press was considered foreign to Algeria despite its focus on Algeria and Algerian issues.

9While little has been written about these groups outside their role in the development of Algerian nationalist politics, Fanny Colonna has argued that these Ulema need to be examined in the context of their religious movement. Fanny Colonna, “Cultural Resistance and Religious Legitimacy in Colonial Algeria”, in *Islam in Tribal Societies: From the Atlas to the Indus*, eds. Akbar Ahmed and David Hart (London: Routledge, 1984), 233-251.
reports and colonial government surveillance reports preserved in the overseas archives now located in Aix en Province detail another approach to political participation outside the sphere of the Francophone press directed to Muslim Algerians. In January 1935, the Governor General of Algeria established a new service for gathering information on northern Algeria, as information gathering to this point was concentrated in the southern territories still governed by the military. The Centre d'information et d'études, despite its innocuous name, was responsible for gathering and analyzing information on developments in Muslim society. The CIE employed careful monitoring of the press as well as covert police surveillance to scrutinize Muslim political activities. While analysis focused on detecting potential threats to French rule, the CIE recorded and preserved extensive information on a variety of Muslim politicians. Additionally, CIE review of the Muslim press starting the year before the election that brought the Popular Front to power reveals longstanding anti-government frustration which often overlapped with the anti-republican frustration of Europeans. Examining this Muslim resentment reveals that while the standard histories of Algeria portray anti-republican agitation among Muslims as opportunism, Muslim support for the Popular Front’s program for reform was in fact the opportunistic turn.

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10 Many of these archives have only been opened within the past twenty years.
Origins in the Right

Before the Popular Front took power in 1936, the Muslim press was highly critical of the Republic and its exploitation of Algeria. Muslim newspapers were very careful to remain pro-French while disparaging the government that represented France in Algeria. These journalists targeted the Algerian Government General located in Algiers, prefects in Oran and Constantine, and the staff of Muslim functionaries managing religious sites and communal property. Until the assumption of governing power in Algeria by the Popular Front, Muslim journalists poured scorn on the functionaries executing the Republic’s policy in Algeria.

In 1930, the French Government General of Algeria observe its centennial in triumphal fashion, marking the important dates of conquest with military parades that Muslims found humiliating. In response to this perceived slight, educated Muslims began their own press campaign to balance the celebratory tone of the government. In addition to a range of new histories that marginalized the French conquest and highlighted its brutality, the columns of the Muslim press generally featured an extended *faits divers* column which spotlighted stories of government corruption and mismanagement. Such attacks on the government and the historical foundations of French Algeria brought Muslim notables, especially representatives from the Élus, but also members of the Association of Ulema, to the attention of government censors attentive to any apparent case of sedition. In order to avoid suppression or jail time, these Muslim publicists turned to their counterparts on the French anti-republican right for a model of opposition propaganda.
Oppositional press

The parties of the anti-republican right had not pioneered the art of polemical press but had certainly gone a long way towards perfecting a technique which challenged the limits of government tolerance. René Remond described two outlets of the anti-republican right in the twentieth century: “Street demonstrations and polemics by a newspaper press lying in wait for scandals, prompt to exploit them, and ready if necessary to invent them.”

Muslim publicists copied this model with their frequent mention of government scandals and in some cases borrowed from the indignation of scandals uncovered by the anti-republican press in Paris for their own use in Algeria.

La Défense, La Justice, L’Entente, and La Voix Indigène all faced constant government suspicions and methodically approached and sought to extend the line beyond which their publications could be censured and distribution stopped. Again they borrowed from the anti-republican model when defending their positions against critics. In an article appearing on 18 May 1934, Mohammed Benhoura, then editor at La Défense, acknowledges the difficulties faced by the Muslim press and offers a justification for the decision to write in French.

He credits the increasing government censorship of Arabic language newspapers and above all a willful misinterpretation of the Arabic language by government translators for mistaking Muslim appeals for justice with demands for independence. In the article

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12 The 15H series in the Centre d’archives d’outre mer contains numerous requests for information from officials in Tunisia and Morocco regarding the Algerian press, especially concerning the more polemical La Défense and La Justice. These requests demonstrate a certain curiosity among administrators in other French territories that such papers are allowed to operate in Algeria, indicating that the press laws in Algeria may have been more tolerant. A report in carton 15H20 from the director of the Department of Indigenous Affairs explains that despite certain questionable articles, given the fact that the papers are published in France, and the editors are often French citizens, legal action is difficult except in the gravest circumstances. Letter of 23 January 1935, from Jules Carde to the Resident General in Rabat.

13 La Défense, 18 May 1934.
Benhoura, under the alias Abdoulhak, writes, “haven’t we chosen the French language in order that our writings might be weighed, judged and understood by exactly those whom we are addressing?...We write in French solely to permit the French of Algeria and of France to come to an understanding of the true situation which we are in, and the injurious rumors of which we are the object.” Failing to mention the press laws which extended greater protection to publications written in French, Benhoura professes the most correct loyalty to France, even as he energetically criticizes the government in Algiers. For Benhoura the Muslim elite write in French so that they can expose to the good French public the transgressions of the Algerian administration that “trembles to see the Government [in France] and the French people informed of their terrible exploits.”¹⁴ Benhoura casts his role as a defender of French honor, pitting good French values against the corruption of the government.

In a special issue appearing just before the separate Muslim municipal elections on 12 May 1935, La Justice ran in bold print a headline reading, “Down with the Staviskys!”¹⁵ At this important moment, and a full year after the February riots that saw anti-republican demonstrators bring down the government in Paris, the allusions to the rally cry of the anti-republican right would have been clear to contemporary observers. The case of government corruption linked to Alexandar Stavisky served as a lightning rod for indignation with the republican government. Following the affair in Paris, writers for La Défense and L’Entente quickly employed the language of the anti-republican right when criticizing the Government General, and those Muslims they felt were compromised by the administration. The use of

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵An undated special edition of La Justice, though we can speculate it appeared on either 10 May or 11 May 1935.
“Staviskite” by *La Justice* on the eve of Muslim elections to discredit other Muslim leaders is indicative of the penetration of the model of the anti-republican right in the language of the Muslim press.

*La Défense* and *La Justice* were singled out for special consideration by government monitors for their particularly vivid and often violent criticisms of Government General polices. Mohammed Benhoura, who also wrote under the names, Abdoulhak and Veritas, was prone to tirades against Judeo-Masonic treachery and relied on anti-Semitic statements to shape his criticisms of the government. His paper, *La Justice* ran the bold Stavisky headline already mentioned, and in another piece appearing in *La Défense* vilifies a government functionary as a, “Jewish Staviskiard”, inherently prejudiced against Muslims.  

While Benhoura was content to copy the language of the anti-republicans, borrowing from their scandals and mimicking their style of anti-Semitism attacks against government officials, another publicist working at *La Défense* criticized the Republic’s civilizing mission explicitly.

Henri Bernier is, unfortunately, a bit of a mystery. A French Catholic working as a featured publicist at a Muslim newspaper, his columns are noted for both their anticipation of future Muslim politics but also for their unmistakable criticism of the French place in Algeria. The Muslim Congress in many ways seems to be a product of his consistent suggestions for the creation of an all Muslim political party. Bernier praised the role of religion in politics and in many places seems to regret the absence of faith among French of the Metropole. In regard to the assimilation of Muslims by the French Republic on 21 December 1934 he wrote,

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16Veritas, “Les dessous d’une rafale”, *La Défense*, 23 February 1935
“The Muslim people of Algeria, Arab or Kabyle, are not ready for such an intimate fusion with the neo-French [pied-noir] of this colony, who must be content, for a long time to come, with bordellos and cat houses for their extra-conjugal affairs. But, in conserving their [Muslim people] morals, their customs, their ancestral ways, (not to mention their women), they will collaborate with the Mère Patrie as equals…thus is created a people, dualistic by religion and by civilization, but united by the same affection for France.”

This rejection of the republican mission, and its vilification through sexualized terms, recalls the same linguistic strategies of the anti-republican right who referred to the Republic as, “the slut”.

While not shy about using incendiary vocabulary to criticize the administration, the writers representing the Élus and Ulemas were fearful of being interpreted as Algerian nationalists, a judgment which would result in their papers being shut down. In an effort to emphasize the patriotism of even those Muslims critical of the administration, on 4 March 1935 La Justice reprinted an interview from L’Action française conducted by Pierre Héricourt, a prominent figure in the anti-republican right. The interview between Héricourt and a member of the Élus focused on the questions of Franco-Algerian union and Muslim naturalization. Héricourt, playing the role of devil’s advocate, quizzed the Muslim delegate on his nationalist sentiments, receiving the response at every question that Muslims feel that they are French, and could never be anything but. While Héricourt confesses some doubt over the Muslim belief that the ability to send representatives to Paris could ever solve their problems, entirely consistent with his anti-parliamentary position, the interview concludes with Héricourt asking, “So, I can affirm that you harbor no hostile feelings toward France,” to which the Muslim delegate responded, “absolutely, say just that.” Here a Muslim elected delegate agreed to be interviewed by a famous anti-republican newspaper to demonstrate their loyalty to France. While the two men may not specifically agree over parliamentary

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17Henri Bernier, “Carmelo”, La Défense, 21 December 1934.
democracy, the interview is an example of how the Muslim Élus were able to use the right to make demands of the French government without rejecting France.

The Muslim Press had a specific interest in covering their anti-government critiques with an aura of patriotism and civic duty as a veneer of pro-French sentiment protected their speech from unwanted scrutiny by the police. Though the Muslim press drew on articles from left and right to fill out their columns, after the riots of Constantine on 5 August 1934 which resulted in the deaths of 23 Jewish men, women, and children, the Muslim press was forced to rely on the anti-republican right to legitimize their positions.

**The reaction to Constantine**

Immediately following the violence, Larmine Lamoudi, owner and publisher of *La Défense*, promised his readers an investigatory trip to Constantine to uncover the truth of the riot. Lamoudi’s subsequent report acknowledged the murders of Jewish families, but attributed the cause to aggression by Jewish men who then fled, leaving their families to answer for their crimes. Lamoudi acknowledged the excessive force used by the Muslim participants, yet managed to absolve the perpetrators by appealing to the motive of self-defense. In subsequent issues of *La Défense*, Lamoudi endeavored to lay out the long term factors which explained the violence between Muslims and Jews. He blamed Jews for a long history of daily oppression of poor Muslims. In the months following the Constantine riots, Lamoudi vented anti-Jewish judgments on the front page of every edition of *La Défense*. In these pages, Lamoudi accused the Jews of Constantine of using their political influence to deny rights to Muslims in order to keep them in servitude. Lamoudi reported inflammatory stories concerning Jewish treatment of Muslim servants. In these accounts, the Jewish families of Constantine called all their domestic servants either Mohammad or Fatima,
insisted that Muslim domestics refer to their Jewish employers as master, and forced their female maids to serve as concubines to keep their wayward sons at home rather than see them wander the streets. Lamoudi attributed full responsibility for the deaths to “excessive Jewish pride” and a Jewish desire to keep Muslims in servitude. Rather than attempting to calm tensions between the two communities, Lamoudi seemed content to absolve Muslims of any responsibility for the Constantine riots in a formula that indicated that the Jewish dead deserved their fate. This inflammatory anti-Semitism would seem to confirm Robert Attal’s explanation that the riots resulted from the anti-republican right’s exploitation of Muslim hatred of Jew, however, the similarities between the anti-republican right’s public reaction to the riot and the accounts provided by La Défense and other Muslim newspapers indicates that anger towards the government’s policy of assimilation was the root concern for both groups.

The Muslim press turned to the anti-republican right for support in absolving Muslims for responsibility in the August attacks. However, this press campaign copied from the European papers avoided the crass anti-Semitism La Défense printed directly after the riots and instead focused on the role of the Republic in creating the conditions for violence. On 14 September 1934, an article from l’Action française entitled “The bloody riots of Constantine” was abstracted in its entirety in La Défense. Below the title was added “the responsibility of the Jews.” While the article from l’Action française attributes the immediate cause for the eruption of violence to a group of Jewish shoppers, the ultimate

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18 *La Défense*, 2 November 1934.

19 Ibid.


21 *La Défense*, 14 September 1934.
blame is attributed to a disastrous policy resulting from the Crémieux decree which had given the indigenous North African Jewish population the right to vote while leaving the Muslims of Algeria powerless. *L’Eclair*, a European anti-republican paper based in Algeria, called on the government to abandon its disastrous policy of favoring, “60,000 inassimilable Jews, French only through the ignominy of Crémieux, over six million devoted Indigènes.” The message in the article is clear: unless the situation is resolved it [the violence] will resume.22 *La Voix Indigène* published a similar account of the Constantine riots that placed blame on the mismanagement by the republican government that promoted the indigenous Jewish population over the Algerian Muslims: “The exasperation of which our Israelite brothers were victims was provoked by something, desperation. We [Muslims] were brought to the point where the smallest pinprick was transformed quickly into the spark that provoked the catastrophe. The explosion of Constantine obliges the Metropole to consider the state of mind of the Algerian Muslim population so that further incidents might be avoided.”23 While still anti-Jewish, both the anti-republican press and the majority of the indigenous Muslim press avoided crass anti-Semitism offered by Lamoudi and in place presented a critique of the government’s policy of assimilation.

Despite a demonstrated willingness to find inspiration and moral justification in the press of the French anti-republican right, only a few articles provide hints of active cooperation between representatives of the anti-republican right and politicians active in Algeria. The opening of a Muslim chapter of the anti-republican league, Croix de Feu, is


23 Ibid.
enthusiastically announced in one edition of *La Justice*. In an article of *L’Entente*, Ferhat Abbas, a member of the federation of Élus, lukewarmly denies a government charge of association with the same group. However, government surveillance reports indicate that the same Muslim notables, along with others uninvolved in the press, were putting words into action and capitalizing on cooperation with the anti-republican right in an effort to gain power in the government of Algeria.

*The right opens new doors*

One individual, who we have already encountered, undeniably jumped into the anti-republican camp in both word and deed in the year before the success of the Popular Front government. Mohammed Benhoura was very active in the Muslim political scene as a publicist noted for the violent tone of his polemics. Benhoura, once editor at *La Défense* in cooperation with Larmine Lamoudi, branched out to found his own publication, *La Justice*, when the two fought over the financial direction of *La Défense*. A police report of a gathering chaired by Benhoura in November of 1934 mentions that the meeting concluded early, due in part to another meeting, this one with the “President of the Croix de Feu?”, at which Benhoura was expected.

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24 *La Justice* 1 January 1935.

25 *L’Entente Franco-Musulmane* 12 September 1935. « Je n’a pas à juger le groupement ‘Croix de Feu’ ni à dire s’il fait ou s’il fait pas de la politique anti-sémitique. C’est son affaire et je suppose qu’il est prêt à supporter la responsabilité de son position”.

26 15H20, A report from the head of the departmental security services describes a number of physical altercations between Benhoura and Lamoudi in December of 1934 over failing finances after which no articles appeared under any of Benhoura’s pseudonyms. After this event he is reported to have traveled the territory extensively to drum up support for *La Justice*. Report from the Chef de la Sûreté départementale to the directeur des Affaires Indigènes, 25 January 1935.

27 15H20, Report from the directeur de la sécurité générale de l’Algérie to the directeur des Affaires Indigènes, 29 November 1934. It is unclear if the author of the report placed a question mark following this phrase based on uncertainty over who Benhoura meant by “President of the Croix de Feu”, or over surprise at the meeting itself.
By piecing various police documents together we get a clear indication that Benhoura was at this time looking for a new angle with which to sell his newspaper and it was to the Croix de Feu that he turned for help. Throughout the summer of 1935 Benhoura toured the department delivering conferences of a distinctly anti-Semitic nature. In Algiers he lectured on the dangers of “Judeo-Masonic collusion”. The report from the town of Bordj, near the city of Setif, indicates that Benhoura categorized “Israelites” as liars and deceitful as he invoked the massacre in nearby Constantine and claimed to be “with” the Croix de Feu against the Franc-Masons.\(^28\) Whether or not Benhoura believed what he said, he employed a vigorous anti-Semitic language while referencing the name and program of the Croix de Feu as he toured the country to promote his new paper.

Apart from capitalizing on the repercussions of anti-Semitism resulting from the Constantine riots, Benhoura had other reasons for choosing and for being accepted into the ranks of the Croix de Feu. A well informed government report from the CIE gives an interesting appraisal of the Croix de Feu, that while questionable for its sweeping characterization of Arab and Berber “mindsets”, advances the theory that the group’s popularity among the Muslim masses stemmed from its martial image and flashy parades. The report goes on to claim that Croix de Feu propaganda among Muslim voters increased significantly in the months before the European municipal elections of May 1935, resulting in substantial gains for the party and several victories for Croix de Feu candidates. According to the document, the Croix de Feu achieved their propaganda success through the medium of Muslim cadres drawn from former soldiers.\(^29\) Mohammed Benhoura, it should be noted, volunteered in 1914, earned the Croix de Guerre, was captured and imprisoned by the

\(^{28}\) 15H20, Renseignements du police général, 2 September 1934.

\(^{29}\) 11H48, CIE report to the Minster of the Interior detailing Muslim political activity, 10 May 1935.
Germans, and had refused to aid in the German propaganda efforts directed toward other Muslim soldiers.\(^{30}\) Benhoura was the perfect candidate for the Croix de Feu’s efforts and the CIE report shows that the Croix de Feu was actively recruiting among the Élus and Ulemas.

Benhoura’s motive was likely increased notoriety and the consequential financial gains for his paper. However, the same report from the CIE gives several other reasons for which Muslim notables could support the Croix de Feu. One reason given is the chance that once ensconced in office, the Croix de Feu might act on some of the Muslim demands.\(^{31}\) The CIE also concluded that “the intellectuals and neo-Wahabites were searching for any way to dislodge Jewish influence in certain towns”. And finally the report notes that a link to the Croix de Feu provides an air of loyalty and civism to those fearful of being cast as anti-French or communist. While it is not entirely clear that the Muslims referenced truly wished to replace the Republic with an authoritarian leader like the Croix de Feu’s demagogic Colonel de La Rocque, they did use anti-republican critics to aid in disparaging the same governmental abuses and the Jewish functionaries whom they held as responsible. Muslim politicians employed affiliation with the anti-republican right in order to force open the door to political power.

The Croix de Feu appealed to politically active Muslims and several notable politicians were attached to the anti-republican right before the arrival of the Popular Front. One Muslim elected to the municipal council in the 12 May 1935 elections was Abderrhamane Boukerdenna, a known member of Action française. Additionally, Ferhat Abbas and Mohammed Bendjelloul were rumored by the administration to have risen to

\(^{30}\)15H20, Cited in a decision to grant *La Justice* a bit more leeway with the censors. Report from the directeur de la sécurité générale de l’Algérie to the directeur des Affaires Indigènes, 21 May 1934.

\(^{31}\)The debate that followed one of Benhoura’s anti-Semitic conferences indicates that in at least one municipality, the Croix de Feu had already voted more money to Muslim education.
prominence through their association with the Croix de Feu.\textsuperscript{32} Noting that it is nearly
impossible to know the number of Muslim members in the Croix de Feu, the CIE report
estimates the total for the department of Algiers at nearly 1000. However, by the summer of
1936, this number evaporated into nearly nothing as the Popular Front won control in Paris
and the leaders of the Élus and Ulemas swung definitively into the government camp.

In the year before the election of the Popular Front, the Muslim elite was divided in
its allegiances to French political parties. While I have attempted to demonstrate that many
looked to the anti-republican right for support, many also supported the Parti Communiste
[PC]. The governing center offered nothing attractive to Muslims in Algeria prior to 1936
and both the PC and the anti-republican right offered a means for Muslims to criticize the
government. The Muslim leadership adopted a more conciliatory tone towards the
administration in Algiers only after the victory of the Popular Front. Nonetheless, despite
their future endorsement of the Popular Front and its Communist members, figures like
Larmine Lamoudi, Ferhat Abbas, Mohammed Benhoura, all who played large roles in the
Muslim Congress, chose to associate with the anti-republican right rather than with the
Communist left.

\textsuperscript{32}9H46, Chef de la sûreté départementale to the directeur de la sécurité générale, 5 August 1936.
The Muslim Congress

When the Popular Front came to power in the spring of 1936, the centerpiece of its legislation for North Africa was the Viollette project for electoral reform. The Popular Front appeared to offer a real prospect for change in a decade dominated by stalemated politics. The Muslim leaders in Algiers and Constantine backed off their verbal attacks against the government and discouraged their followers from engaging in any nationalist displays, prudently waiting to see which way the wind would blow. In the summer of 1936 representatives from all urban Muslim political groups were invited by Dr. Bendjelloul, the leader of the Élus of Constantine, to participate in a Muslim Congress to defend Muslim interests and lobby for reform. Excluded were the ENA and its leader Messali Hadj, who, despite being the most recognizable leader of Muslims living in France, was barred from attending the Congress on the grounds that his platform called for independence rather than accommodation with the Popular Front government. The Muslim Congress represented the realization of a longstanding objective of forming a Muslim party capable of uniting Muslim interests against colonial exploitation. While the original concept for a united party envisioned a defense of Muslim society against the inroads of the Government General, The Congress’s actual composition indicated its commitment to accommodation with the Popular Front government.

This commitment to integration is manifested by the inclusion in the Congress of the Algerian Communist Party. Fearing the increasing threat of fascism the PC no longer demanded the complete independence of Algeria and instead focused on strengthening France and the Soviet Union in preparation for an impending conflict. As a partner in the

33 The Frenchman Bernier was one of the first to lobby strongly for this.
Popular Front government, and an organization with many Muslim members, the PCA occupied a central role in the direction of the Muslim Congress as an intermediary between the Congress and the governing coalition in Paris. For the first six months of the Congress, Muslims all over Algeria abandoned their old allies on the right and looked to the rising fortunes of the Popular Front and the Muslim Congress. Those unwilling to accept the change were cajoled, then isolated. Publicists like Larmine Lamoudi, the first president of the Muslim Congress, employed the full weight of their papers to impose an internal discipline and to keep the Congress together. As the Popular Front increasingly defaulted on its promises and began to resemble the previous government in its failure to respond to Muslim demands and its decision to imprison outspoken Algerian leaders, its new supporters quickly reversed course and sought to associate with the anti-republican right, at this point the only group able to assert strong anti-government credentials.³⁴

**Faith in the Popular Front**

It was only in the months running up to the elections in the spring of 1936 that Muslim publicists began to change their position with regard to the parties of the left. Prior to the elections that swept the Popular Front into power, *La Défense, L’Entente,* and *La Voix Indigène* all demonstrated careful neutrality. In February of 1936 *L’Entente* asserted that, “despite a few nuances, they [the anti-republican right and the Popular Front] are both colonizers.”³⁵ The papers representing the major figures of the Élus and the Ulemas were hesitant to choose sides. This reluctance can be seen in the account given in *La Défense* following one of Benhoura’s anti-Semitic speeches on the dangers of Judeo-Masonry. The

³⁴The Popular Front’s decision to arrest Messali in 1937 definitively swayed many Muslims from cooperating with the government.

³⁵15H1, Article cited appeared in *L’Entente Franco-Musulman,* 20 February 1935.
police report of the event relates that partisans of the left and right both attempted to take
over the podium with shrill denunciations of their opponents. Some attempted to read from
copies of *L’Action française* while others applauded the actions of the ENA and the left. In
its 2 August 1935 issue, *La Défense* responded to this chaotic political climate and cautioned
readers to abstain from such demonstrations of partisanship, counseling them to be, “Simply,
with the French, who are filled with the best feelings for our cause, whether they are from the
left or right, whether they are a Jew, a Catholic or a Franc-Mason.”  
Ferhat Abbas expressed
a similar attitude in a *L’Entente* article dating from 26 March 1936 where he asserts that
Muslim Élus should know how to remain in the opposition while “refusing to be the men of
one party, so that they are able to negotiate with all.”

As the notable Muslim politicians waited out the struggle between the French left and
right, other less influential politicians jettisoned their former allies for new associations on
the left. A routine report from the department of Indigenous Affairs providing background
information on one Cadi Abdelkader notes that he rose to prominence by ingratiating himself
with the anti-republican group Front Paysan, a group linked to Action Française, only to
abandon this group following the Popular Front victory and began work with the Socialists,
going as far as to have himself elected vice-president of a regional agricultural union. 
Before the elections, Mohammed Benhoura directed his Muslim readers to support the
Popular Front, as “only the socialo-communistes hear their complaints.”

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36 *La Défense*, 2 August 1935.
37 15H1, Affaires Indigènes report on the press for 15 March to 31 March 1936.
38 0H46, Chef de la sûreté départementale to the directeur de la sécurité générale, 5 August 1936.
Following the victory of the Popular Front, The Élus and Ulemas held the first meeting of the Muslim Congress in July of 1936. Despite past professions of neutrality, the Congress adopted a stance supportive of the Popular Front, offering favorable appraisals in their press and defending government officials. In June of 1936, *La Voix Indigène* published an article ensuring Muslims that they were right to place their faith in the Popular Front, though the author alluded to some reservations about the long-term prosperity of a union between Communists and Muslims and noted that other friends may yet be found elsewhere. *La Défense* wrote in the same month that the interests of Muslims were definitively oriented to the left following the victory in the May elections.\(^{40}\) In an article from 8 August 1936 Benhoura concludes with “Long live the Popular Front government”. The same month the leader of the Ulemas, BenBadis, was quoted in the PCA newspaper, *La Lutte Sociale*, as stating, “Our sympathies are held by the Popular Front, to which we are linked in life or death.”\(^{41}\)

*Silencing Dissent*

Even as figures such as Lamoudi and BenBadis threw their support behind the Viollette project and the Popular Front government, a significant number of Muslim notables openly criticized the course of collaboration undertaken by the Congress. In response, the publicists affiliated with the Ulemas and the Élus attempted to marginalize any Muslim politician who deviated from the Congress position.

\(^{40}\)15H1, Affaires Indigènes report on the press, month of June 1936.

\(^{41}\)Ibid, month of August, Lutte Sociale, 8 August 1936.
Messali Hadj rejected the Viollette project as a half step, and a measure which would ultimately hinder Algerian autonomy and another example of divide and conquer.\textsuperscript{42} As Messali’s vision of an independent Algeria developed, he came into conflict with his former patrons, the Communist party, which had moved from an anti-colonial position to a stance advocating incorporating Algeria with France. Messali’s refusal to endorse the Viollette plan and his open hostility towards the Communists led the Ulemas and Élus to direct a vigorous campaign to limit ENA influence in Algeria.

It was Messali’s indisputable status as a figure of opposition that led to his growing popularity. The Ulemas and Élus responded by banning any member of their organization who associated with Messali or expressed ENA sympathies. Said Zahiri, a founding member of the Association of Ulemas and one of the few notables from the Oranais, was expelled from the organization for associations with the ENA/PPA in September 1936.\textsuperscript{43} Both the Élus and Ulemas were quick to ostracize any of their members who criticized either the legislation of the Popular Front or openly disapproved of the participation of the European left, notably the Communists, in the Muslim Congress.

Doctor Bendjelloul, the leading member of the federation of Élus in Constantine, and one of the most prominent politicians in Algeria during the decade, was himself removed from the Muslim Congress and attacked by the mainstream press for criticizing the role assigned to the Communists. Apparently, his was not the only reservation. In an article announcing the founding of the Muslim Congress, the PCA newspaper, \textit{La Lutte Sociale}, commented that, “Great efforts must now be made. These consist of maintaining the union


\textsuperscript{43}9H28, \textit{Renseignements concerning Chiekh Said Zahiri for les centres d’information et études}, 21 September 1936.
established and eliminating the regrettable prejudices that certain militants hold towards the worker militants.”

Evidently not everyone was convinced of the suitability of the Communists as political allies. Cracks were beginning to show in the Muslim Congress, especially concerning the inability of the Muslim Congress leadership, now controlled by the Ulema, to demonstrate the compatibility of the PCA. By October 1936 new publications, sponsored by non-Ulema religious associations, appeared in Algeria and relied on quotes from the Koran to demonstrate the fundamental incompatibility of Islam with Communism. Others reproduced articles from rightist European papers like *Le Matin* published in Algiers, “exposing the destructive impact of communist propaganda”.

In order to respond to these attacks, *La Défense* and *La Lutte Sociale* linked concerns about communism to ties with Fascism. In *La Lutte Sociale*, “Bendjelloul can count on the adhesion of the nationalist parties, with the Ferhats, the Boukerdennas, the Bentamis, the Mekkis, and the Zine Bentabets; with them will be the residents of the countryside, the Zaouias, the Marabouts and the nationalist colons.” This passage links the older perceived enemies of the Ulema, the Sufi brotherhoods and the Marabouts, with their new enemies, those who question the Popular Front and the Muslim Congress. At the same time an article in *La Défense* assured Muslim solidarity “in the combat against the common enemy, Fascism.”

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44 15H1, Affaires Indigènes report on the press, Lutte Sociale 15 July 1936.

45 15H1, Affaires Indigènes report on the press, 15 September to 30 September 1936. *En Nadjah* 27 September. Affaires Indigènes report on the press, 1 October to 15 October 1936. *Sidi Henini* 3 October 1936. *Sidi Henini* also criticized the Ulema for not being as anti-Semitic as they should be.

46 15H1, Affaires Indigènes report on the press, *La Lutte Sociale*, 7 October 1936. Though Ferhat is one of the names appearing in the list, I doubt it refers to Ferhat Abbas. At this point Abbas seems to have taken over leadership of the Élus remaining with the Muslim Congress.

47 *La Défense*, 11 November 1936.
enemies, the religious leaders of the Ulemas, BenBadis and El Okbi, were reassuring their readers that Communism held no direct challenge for Islam and that finally, a government sympathetic to the plight of pious Muslims was ready to make redress.  

The press exchanges followed this pattern through the fall and into the next year with *La Justice*, *La Défense*, and *La Lutte Sociale* rebuking Bendjelloul and Messali while the Ulemas defended their cooperation with the Communists, the Popular Front and the Viollette project. However, by the spring, patience was running out and leading up to the first anniversary of the Congress, the propaganda campaign designed to isolate dissenters had succeeded only in fragmenting the tenuous alliances holding the Congress together. Lamoudi’s refusal to suspend his vigorous opposition to an important ally of BenBadis, and as a result was removed as the president of the Muslim Congress. Growing doubts over the compatibility of Islam and Communism began to split the strongest knot holding together the Muslim Congress, the Ulemas and the Communists. Without the unified support of the Ulemas, the Congress lost its moral authority and support for the Popular Front dwindled. The rapid swing to the left in the wake of the Popular Front victory slowly reversed itself and military officials in the territory began to wonder which side the Muslims would fight for if war broke out between France and Germany.  

Declining confidence in the Popular Front can be seen as early as April 1937. In a speech given by Cheikh El Okbi in the presence of a government official, the prominent Ulema indicated his frustration with the lack of achievement by the Popular Front in stating, “If we were more frivolous, we might find what we are looking for with Mussolini, Franco, 

4815H1, Affaires Indigènes report on the press, Ach Chihab, El Bassair and El Ouma Mozabite all reported on the same speech given by BenBadis the leader of the reformist Ulema.  

490H47, Report from Lieutenant Colonel chef de la section d’Outre Mer de l’état major to Gouverneur Général, 15 July 1937.
or Mustapha Kemal who all solicit the friendship of Muslims.” Not only did increasing numbers of Muslims speculate on different possible partnerships, like the public threats of El Okbi, but a large number of the leaders of the Muslim Congress drifted away from the Popular Front and connected with new elements from the anti-republican right or with Messali’s Parti Populaire Algérien [PPA], the two parties most openly opposing the government.

The signs of transformation are abundant in the police surveillance from the period. Agents were again reporting on expulsions from Muslim groups for communist or socialist associations. Propaganda from Germany and Italy spread through the ranks of Muslim soldiers and found new life in the pages of Muslim papers. Finally, Messali Hadj reconciled with members of the Élus and Ulemas and brought them into the orbit of the pan-Arab movement, which was hostile to France, and beholden to German financial support. As the unity of the Muslim Congress collapsed and faith in the Popular Front faded, Muslim politicians looked for new allies. Though the old parties of the anti-republican right, namely the Croix de Feu and L’Action Française were no longer serious contenders in Algerian politics, new anti-republican political parties were eager to welcome those Muslims frustrated by the promises of the republican government.

**The Congress Collapses**

One of the first major politicians to criticise the participation of communists in the Muslim Congress and re-emerge as a leader on the right was Mohammed Bendjelloul, the most widely recognized Muslim politician in eastern Algeria. Following his complaints, the executive committee expelled him. This led to a power struggle which would see a

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5015H1, Affaires Indigènes report on the press, reported in *El Ouma Mozabite*, 20 April 1937.
significant portion of the Congress’s membership depart. A secret government document from August of 1937 reports that an influential association of Muslim veterans, traditional backers of the anti-republican right Croix de Feu, had resigned their place on the executive committee of the Muslim Congress after Bendjelloul’s ousting.\(^{51}\) Rather than accept political exile, Bendjelloul went about creating a new coalition uniting his former anti-republican supporters and traditional religious factions hostile to the Ulemas. Following his expulsion, Bendjelloul sponsored a traditional Islamic festival in his hometown of Constantine, a move designed to infuriate his old allies among the reformer Ulemas and demonstrate his continued popularity. Attended by over 20,000 people, the *Zerda* reinforced Bendjelloul’s status as a leader among the Muslims of Constantine and strengthened the ties between his faction and the traditional Islamic organization.\(^{52}\) To lay further claim to his status as the most important Muslim political force, Bendjelloul called for a strike of elected Muslim officials in August of 1937. Despite protests from the Muslim Congress, 2,521 of 3,000 officials from the department of Constantine resigned their positions.\(^{53}\)

While the Muslim Congress was busy trying to cleanse the organization of dissenters like Bendjelloul, Communists in various organizations throughout Algeria were excluded from participation due to their leftist political positions.\(^{54}\) Additionally, Muslim members of the Communist and Socialist parties were defecting from the Popular Front. One lengthy report comes from the community of Sebdou, where a Muslim school teacher made a very public break with the left, apparently telling everyone who would listen of his disillusion

\(^{51}\)9H46, Report from the Préfet of Constantine to the Gouverneur Général, 5 August 1937.

\(^{52}\)11H48, CIE Report, 7 September 1937.

\(^{53}\)11H48, Ibid.

\(^{54}\)In January 1938 a certain Association for the Moral Education of Muslims replaced its leader, a known member of the socialist party with Mohammed Mekki, an associate of Doriot’s PPF.
with the Popular Front, a party run by Jews in his opinion, and announced his intention to, “Shift his rifle to the other shoulder”. He went on to apply for admission to an organization called the Cercle Foch and attempted to publish several anti-Semitic articles in the local paper. The school teacher caused enough of a stir that his superiors sent a request that he be transferred to another post. The report justifies the request stating that even before the recent events he was a cause for concern as the leading Communist militant in the region. This public leap from one extreme to another was not an isolated event. As dissatisfaction with the Popular Front spread, organizations throughout Algeria experienced a noticeable changeover of personnel as administrators switched allegiances and PCA members were excluded.

More significantly, the understanding between the Communists and the Ulemas, the core of the Muslim Congress, began to break up, and influential leaders of the Ulemas revised their stance on accommodation with France. While Larmine Lamoudi continued to support the Viollette project and the Popular Front government, his closest collaborators among the Ulemas drifted into the orbit of Messali and another influential advocate of Islamic independence, Chiekb Arslan. Arslan knew BenBadis from connections in the Wahabist and pan-Islamic movements, and Messali, after his release from prison in the 1930s, lived in exile with Arslan in Geneva. Messali and BenBadis’ mutual connection to Arlsan may have served as a point of reconciliation between a significant portion of the Ulemas and Messali’s PPA, renamed after the Popular Front government dissolved the ENA. At the end of 1937, police surveillance reported several meetings of the political directors of

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55H47, Administrateur de la commune mixte de Sebdou, to the sous-préfet, 25 May 1938. The dossier on M. Hamdi is quite extensive for a school teacher and follows his political activity from his days as a communist militant to the point where he was transferred in the summer of 1938. It would appear his change of opinion concerning the Popular Front occurred at the beginning of 1938.

56While I am unsure of the personal relationship between BenBadis and Arslan, citations of Arslan’s articles appear often in BenBadis’ paper *Ach Chihab* and both men were in close connection with the Destourians in Tunisia.
the PPA with BenBadis and his lieutenants at which a general truce was established.\footnote{Two separate meetings in February of 1938. 9H47, Commissaire Central de Telmcen to the Gouverneur Général, 9 February 1938.} Whereas one year before, Mohamed Kheirredine, an influential member of the Ulema, called Messali the most dangerous man in the colony, one eager to sell Algeria to the enemies of France, certain members of the association of Ulema were now looking to smooth over the tensions with Messali. Surveillance reports tell us that Mohammed Benhoura met with Messali in August of 1937 to extend the olive branch.\footnote{9H47, Rapport du Sous-Chef de la Sûreté Départementale, 11 August 1937.} One week later a flattering article appeared in \textit{La Justice} to explain the misunderstandings plaguing Messali’s PPA.\footnote{\textit{La Justice}, 17 August 1937.} In 1937 the CIE reported that the PPA was making new efforts to draw together the members of other parties that it once openly disdained.\footnote{9H47, Dossier labeled Partis Politiques en [19]37, It also notes that Messali was firmly under the influence of Arslan following his exile in Geneva.} By this point, the Muslim Congress was in full collapse and the PPA was on the rise.

Frustration with the Popular Front and doubts over assimilation had split the once solid Muslim Congress coalition and what the CIE end of year report sums up is the breakdown of the Congress:

\begin{quote}
“The enthusiasm for the Popular Front seems to be fading like a balloon deflating. As those promises, so easily and widely disseminated, have gone unrealized, each [member of the Congress] disengages in a moment of calculated passion….At the same time each tries to assure a new position. Whether by organizing a new base, or by concluding new alliances outside the union [Congress], one can clearly feel the work of hands probing in the shadows.”\footnote{11H48, CIE Report, January 1938.}
\end{quote}

Faith in the republican model was definitively on the decline and two groups, Messali’s PPA and the European anti-republican right, profited from this collapse by attracting new
supporters into powerful political blocs. Each group represented an alternative anti-republican vision and historians have contrasted these visions based on their stance on French presence in Algeria. However, evidence demonstrates considerable overlap in their anti-republican positions and significant instances of active cooperation.
The Evolution of the Right in the Oranais

Following the collapse of the Muslim Congress, the anti-republican right in Algeria was encouraged. Emboldened by the failure of the Popular Front government to push through the Viollette project, the anti-republican parties began a new campaign to bring Muslims into their ranks. At least one small group of Europeans even began stockpiling weapons in western Algeria and making plans for an overthrow of the state. While the prospects for armed insurgency in Algeria were in reality negligible, certain leaders of the anti-republican right made no secret of their desire to transform Algeria into a base from which they would re-conquer the Metropole. This scenario, while never actually attempted in the interwar period, had a precedent in the late 1890s when radical Europeans attempted to separate from France, and would be attempted twice again over the course of the Algerian War. Though an open revolt in the 1930s by the anti-republican right in Algeria never occurred, the popularity of anti-republican parties among Muslims was growing, and high-level negotiations between Muslim leaders and anti-republican European politicians were underway. If not for the intervention of the Second World War, the anti-republican right may have put together a movement capable of challenging the assimilatory rhetoric underpinning the French Republic’s colonial philosophy.

Both European and Muslim anti-republican protest were taking a more active form. In March of 1937 the prefect of Oran reported that several strikes by Muslim agricultural workers necessitated the deployment of the mobile reserves of the gendarmes supported by a

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62 This is the CSAR group. 17 men with ties to anti-republican parties were arrested for hording weapons. Most had ties to Franco’s Spain. The group was in the process of recruiting among anti-republican parties in the Oran region when arrested. 9H49, Report from the Prefect to the Gouverneur Général, 3 March 1938.

63 Ageron attributes this vision to Victor Arrighi, Doriot’s delegate for Algeria. Ageron, Histoire de L’Algérie Contemporaine, 375.
regiment of the Foreign Legion to keep the peace. The report emphasized that social movements only rarely seen in the country were spreading through the efforts of propaganda originating in the newspapers of Oran. The prefect closed his report by pleading with the Governor General to allocate more relief funds to help quell discontent, as he feared that without it, unrest would spread.⁶⁴

It would be a mistake to view cooperation between the anti-republican right and Muslim politicians as one continuous association interrupted by the Muslim Congress years. In addition to new actors in the anti-republican right, the rhetoric emerging on both European and Muslim sides developed a new tone. Rather than be content to merely criticize the failed institutions of the Republic, the anti-republican right and their Muslim listeners developed a new enthusiasm for solutions. The optimism inspired and disappointed by the Muslim Congress persisted, and dynamic politicians on the anti-republican right were poised to take advantage of it by offering a host of alternative projects.

Contributing to the number of viable alternatives was the wealth of fascist propaganda arriving in Algeria from Italy, Germany and Spain. El Ouma of Paris, the press of the ENA/PPA published an article on 1 June 1937 approving of Fascist Italy’s liberal colonial politics. The article condemns France and England’s colonial excesses and makes no mention of Italy’s colonial invasion of Ethiopia.⁶⁵ In July of 1937, a secret police report from Oran notes that a member of the PPA was working in the Italian consulate and comments with some concern that he buys copious rounds of drinks for his fellow members of the PPA.

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⁶⁴0H49, The Préfet of Oran to the Gouverneur Général, 17 March 1937

⁶⁵15H1, Affaires Indigènes report on the press, June/July 1937. Not to be confused with El Ouma Mozabite.
with the consulate’s money, perhaps courting Muslims for the Italians.\(^{66}\) Yet another report in the same month, this one from a local military commander, expresses concern that certain rumors originating with members of the PPA claim that Italy favors Muslims more than France does. The commander goes on to wonder which side Algerian Muslims would support if the propaganda continues.\(^{67}\)

The origin of this propaganda is difficult to locate. As early as 1936, reports indicate that German propaganda in Algeria was significant, and that Chekib Arslan and his connections among the Ulema were the primary outlets for such anti-French sentiment. One report specifically claims that the Germans supported Arslan in Geneva.\(^{68}\) However, it also claims that the Arab-Berber mindset is infused with the same notions of ethnic purity that inspire German racism. The author also notes that works by Nietzsche were very popular that year among students at the Medrasa.\(^{69}\) Tellingly, a later report from the same office lists two sources of foreign interference in Algerian affairs, Moscow and Arslan’s Geneva circle. In its final appraisal, the report indicated that Moscow’s influence would weaken with the decline of the Popular Front, while Geneva’s would thrive, “as its actions, interpreted by the Ulema and l’Etoile, are more comprehensible and more compatible with [the mass’s] deeper aspirations.”\(^{70}\)

\(^{66}\) 9H47, Report from agent de renseignements, Lazib, to Directeur de la sécurité générale, 29 September 1937.

\(^{67}\) 9H47, Report from Lieutenant Colonel chef de la section d’Outre Mer de l’état major to Gouverneur Général, 15 July 1937.

\(^{68}\) 11H48, CIE report to the interior ministry, 10 May 1936.

\(^{69}\) Ibid. While the report may seem overanxious, another commentary on media entering the country notes that the majority of media in Arabic imported to Algeria originated in Italy. 15H25, Renseignements, Propagande italienne par la presse, 24 January 1938.

\(^{70}\) 11H48, CIE end of year report for 1937.
While observers in the military may have been more concerned with German or Italian propaganda, another source of fascist influence was the municipal government of Oran. Much closer in terms of distance to Spain than to France, many Algerian Europeans in the department of Oran maintained close ties with Franco’s government. Chief among them was the mayor of Oran, Gabriel Lambert.

Lambert was a former priest and a maverick politician who occupied a central position in anti-republican politics in western Algeria. His political success seemed to derive from his control over the municipal administrators in the city of Oran and minor elected officials from the surrounding region. Lambert maintained close ties with the Franco administration and was suspected of passing information to the Spanish. A secret report relying on a source in the Spanish postal office confirmed that Lambert had addressed several letters to Franco’s foreign ministry. Another report details a visit Lambert made to Spanish Morocco and Spain, “entirely at the expense of the Spanish government.”

Lambert’s hold over power in Oran was accomplished through a network of personal ties to business leaders and important relationships with Muslim administrators whose votes ensured his control over municipal politics. When undertaking an official visit to Spain, Lambert intended to be accompanied by his Muslim adjunct Mohammed Mekki, who at the last moment pulled out of the trip. In October of 1937, Abbé Lambert, changed the name of his political party from Amities Lambert to Amities Latines et Musulmanes. Shortly after, he

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71 9H49, Report from the chef de la police spéciale to the préfet, 4 July 1938. The report urges the préfet not to divulge the Spanish source to anyone in the mayor’s office indicating that the Franco regime would find out and harm the informant. Other reports discuss the activities of Europeans spying for Franco. Also suspected was the publisher of Oran-Matin Alain de Berthois. 9H49, Préfet’s report to the Gouverneur Général, 21 July 1938.

72 11H48, Renseignements from the police for the CIE, 13 July 1939.
approached PPA representatives to inquire about joint funding for a propaganda campaign.\textsuperscript{73}

In October of 1938, police reports indicate that Lambert shielded a Muslim Élu elected to office through the Popular Front from police investigation.\textsuperscript{74} While Lambert certainly held sway in Oran, his manifestations of animosity towards the Republic were limited to sharing close relations with unfriendly foreign powers. His position of authority derived from skillful manipulation of electoral politics and through cultivating naturalized Muslim citizens to use against his rivals. If Lambert disapproved of the Viollette project it would be on the grounds that more Muslim electors would dilute his source of power among naturalized Muslims.

While Lambert relied on personal relationships of patronage and sought to capitalize on traditional paternalist forms of leadership, another group was gaining ground in Oran with a much more openly anti-republican platform. Jacques Doriot’s Parti Populaire Française developed strategy to attract Muslims which formulated a counter proposal for Muslim integration with France.\textsuperscript{75}

Doriot had been a prominent anti-colonial advocate among the Communists before defectsing to the anti-republican right in the spring of 1934. His anti-colonial past in Morocco, along with the decline of the Croix de Feu, would have left Doriot’s PPF as the anti-republican group most familiar to Muslims. A concentrated propaganda campaign including bi-lingual PPF pamphlets and numerous organized speeches in Arabic by Muslim members spread the PPF agenda in Western Algeria. In addition to the press campaign, Doriot undertook two highly publicized tours through Algeria where he lectured on the “Muslim

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{9H49}, CIE Report sur la situation politiques des indigènes de l’Algérie, February 1938.

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{9H46}, Renseignements from the police prefecture, 31 October 1938. The Élu in question is Bachtarzi elected with the help of the SFIO. The author of the document infers that the Popular Front had definitively lost its creditability among Muslim groups.

\textsuperscript{75} The best work available on Doriot is Jean Paul Brunet, \textit{Jacques Doriot, du communisme au fascisme}, (Paris, Balland, 1986).
problem” to mixed audiences of Muslims and Europeans. The PPF campaign in Algeria attempted to attract Muslims and Europeans into one political organization united against the Republic’s administration of Algeria.

Two Muslim Élus, Bentabet and Bentami were Doriot’s most valuable assets in his campaign to create a broad coalition of Europeans and Muslims. They had considerable responsibility and were present at the highest level meetings in Algeria. Reports indicate that they traveled with a PPF regional delegate, Victor Arrighi, to Paris at one point to consult with Doriot over his strategy for Algeria. The fact that the anti-republican parties involved Muslims in strategy decisions was not lost on government observers. In one CIE report, the author comments that part of the frustration demonstrated by Muslims with regards to the Communist party was the Communists’ unwillingness to place Muslims in positions of responsibility.\footnote{11H48, CIE report on political situation, February 1938.} The anti-republican right, though often mentioned in connection with racist xenophobia, rewarded Muslim members with high level positions.

As early as 1936, the PPF in Algeria under the direction of Victor Arrighi were holding meetings to discuss Muslim concerns in Algeria.\footnote{Little has been written on the PPF in Algeria in the historiography of French Far Right. William Irvine has argued that pressure from Algeria resulted in Doroit’s public anti-Semitism in William D Irvine, “Fascism in France and the Strange Case of the Croix de Feu”, \textit{The Journal of Modern History}, Vol 63, No. 2 (January, 1991), 271-295.} At one such meeting in Mostaganem, the Muslim Élu, Dr. Bentami, introduced a speaker who examined the future of Muslim-European relations for a mixed crowd of Muslims and Europeans, including local business leaders, local administrators and former members of the other anti-republican parties.\footnote{11H48, Report to the prefect of Oran from the commissaire central of Mostaganem, 20 October 1936} The speaker, a former communist, argued that France had failed in its mission to civilize Algerians and had produced wheat and wine in Algeria but not men. He argued that
methods must change, that the colons must soften their stance against Muslims and afford them a living wage, a better life, and the justice which Muslims rightly demand.

To respond to the Viollette project, Doriot developed his own program of reforms for Algerian Muslims. The Doriot Plan rejected the premise of assimilation and stated that, “Muslims have the right to preserve their religion and their [separate] legal status.”79 At a meeting on May 26 1937, Gaston Vidal, the secretary the Oran section of the PPF, declared, “We must undertake a crusade to make France understand that in Algeria there are two million of our Muslim brothers who have had their heads filled with illusory projects while they are dying of hunger.”80 The PPF’s disdain for assimilation and their continued attacks on the government’s conduct in Algeria drew attention from Algerian Muslims.

The most curious manifestation of new alliance building took place between Doriot’s PPF and Messali’s PPA. Messali had always maintained a firm demand for Algerian independence, yet when Messali was arrested on 27 August 1937, the PPF’s Vidal published an article in Oran-Matin which announced his group as “concerned”. It noted that if notorious Communists such as BenBadis and Barthel were allowed their liberty, Messali was certainly entitled to his. Gaston Vidal, the chairman of the Oran section of the PPF assured his readers that such a penalty [prison] would be justified if Messali was advocating independence as he had during the days of the Etoile. Vidal pointed out that, “today [Messali] demands only dominion.”81 In his biography of Messali, Benjamin Stora reports

79 The rest of the Doriot project consisted of a promise of a separate electoral college consisting of all Algerian Muslims. Its relationship to the French electoral college was never firmly defined.

80 9H49, Report to the Préfet by police générale, 28 May 1937.

81 9H49, Report from 2 December 1937. It is unclear what Vidal meant by dominion.
that critics of Messali increasingly associated his PPA with Doriot’s PPF.\textsuperscript{82} While this interpretation of Messali’s vision as non-threatening to French interest in Algeria is not proof of those allegations that PPA equates to PPF, it is nonetheless surprising that the PPF could see past Messali’s prior position on French rule in Algeria.

After Messali’s arrest, his organization took steps towards partnership with the PPF and with Lambert’s Oran circle. Messali’s PPA, underground since its dissolution by the Popular Front government, lacked any centralized leadership, and local leaders independently reached out to various political organizations. A new umbrella organization, the Djemia el Felah, had sprung up sometime following the dissolution of the PPA. This group is not analyzed by any of the CIE reports, nor does it appear in any of the regular reports on the press.\textsuperscript{83} It does however figure noticeably in the regular police reports of Muslim political activity. In the short time from Messali’s arrest to the outbreak of hostilities and his ultimate deportation to West Africa, Djemia el Felah accrued a wide range of associations with seemingly antagonistic organizations.\textsuperscript{84}

The only way to identify Djemia el Falah with the PPA is through a cross-listing of members and leaders occasionally compiled by the prefecture in Oran.\textsuperscript{85} Certain anti-colonial statements and an almost complete absence of communists and socialists in attendance at the meetings suggests a continuity between Djemia el Falah and the PPA. In March of 1939 forty members of Djemia el Falah met with the leading Muslim members of the PPF, Zine

\textsuperscript{82}Stora, \textit{Messali Hadji}, 161-162.

\textsuperscript{83}By 1938 the press reports compiled by the office of Indigenous Affairs take on a repetitive nature and miss major events in Muslim politics. Presumably these monitoring duties were assumed by the CIE.

\textsuperscript{84}Messali was arrested for re-constitution of a dissolved association. He was transferred out of Algeria following his trial in March 1941.

\textsuperscript{85}9H46, Chef de la sûreté départementale to the Préfet, 12 April 1938.
Bentabet and Dr. Bentami. The purpose of the meeting was to find a suitable response to unspecified government complaints directed at Djemia. Another such document, marked secret, reports on a private Djemia el Falah meeting attended by noted PPA members along with Muslims working for the town hall of Oran and the paper *Oran-Matin*, at this time under the direction of Doriot’s PPF. Also identified at the meeting was a prominent member of the association of Ulemas. The agenda discussed was the establishment of a pan-north African front to defend Muslim interests. This meeting, involving Ulemas, Djemia el Falah, former PPA members, and known associates of the anti-parliamentary right, reveals a different process of coalition building following the collapse of the Muslim Congress.

**Conclusion**

Ageron and Julien’s histories of Algeria continue their narratives of Algerian politics following the dissolution of the Muslim Congress with a focus on the new political parties established by Ferhat Abbas and Mohammed Bendjelloul in the Constantine region. These rival organizations have been interpreted by historians as an indicator of radicalization among the Muslim political elite. As the Muslim Congress collapsed Abbas led a portion of its members to demand more independence for Algerian Muslims and increased political rights. Historians of Algerian nationalism interpret this move as a significant moment when a

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86H28, Report of Chef de la sûreté départementale, 17 March 1939. Bentami, it should be noted, is a long time associate of Mohammed Benhoura of *La Justice*.

87Interestingly the members of Djemia el Falah accused the same Élu protected by Lambert, a man named Bachterzi, of putting the government on to them, indicating perhaps competition between Lambert’s organization and Doriot’s PPF.

88Reports claim that both the town hall and the paper *Oran-Matin* were completely controlled by the PPF or other similar rightist organizations. Other reports indicate that *Oran-Matin* offered frequent apéritifs for local Muslim notables that were well attended 9H46, Chef de la sûreté départementale to the Préfet, 15 March 1936.
nationalist movement began to articulate demands for Algerian autonomy from France.⁸⁹ These demands emphasized the cultural specificity of Algeria and called for three changes: instruction of Arabic, liberty to practice their Islam, and an education system separate from that France. These desires run contrary to the ideology of assimilation underpinning the Republic’s colonial philosophy. And while these scholars are correct in pointing to them as an important evolution in the development of Algerian nationalism, what they do not account for is that at the same time, coalitions proposing the same measures of Algerian autonomy were encouraged and supported by European political parties.

With the formation of the Muslim Congress, a process was set in motion that could not be undone. The Popular Front made promises to Muslims which it ultimately could not keep, and in doing so, it created a stronger desire for reform throughout Algeria. The Muslim Congress momentarily forestalled criticism of the republican government, but after its collapse, Muslim advocates for reform in Algeria returned to opposition parties with new expectations. In western Algeria, the European parties with an established record of challenging the government administration were those of the anti-republican right, and these organizations capitalized on growing Muslim discontent to swell their ranks. The nascent Algerian nationalists and the anti-republican right shared an enemy in the government of the Republic, but the axiom, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, is not sufficient to explain the relationship between the two.

What permitted these two seemingly divided interests to act together was a shared rejection of the model of assimilation and the republican government that endorsed it. In the short term at least, nationalist interests and anti-republican interests coincided, and the potential advantages of partnership led each side to make some concessions. The benefits of

such a partnership become less clear once the common enemy was removed. Once the anti-
republican right assumed power in Algeria under Vichy, they no longer needed to cooperate
with the Muslim leadership to secure their position. Talk of accommodation came to a halt as
the anti-republican parties, once in opposition, were now left to manage the restless European
colons who were reluctant to see any autonomy extended to their Muslim subordinates.

Unwilling to alienate their European backers, the anti-republicans made no more
compromises with the Muslim leadership, leaving Messali’s nationalist party as the only
alternative to the French Republic.
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