

Political Islam in Algeria

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Abstract

The recent legislative elections of May 2007 in Algeria have shown how complex the evolution of Islamist parties is in this country and how crucial an understanding of these mechanisms has become for Europe. Since the civil war of the 1990s, Islamist parties have experienced increased political participation. Drawing on interviews with various Algerian Islamist actors, this paper analyses how Islamist parties are building a new relationship with democratic mechanisms in Europe. In light of these recent changes, a reconsideration of EU democracy promotion policies is now necessary.

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POLITICAL ISLAM IN ALGERIA

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Algerian Islamist movements are some of the most heterogeneous in the Arab world. Algeria has a wide range of Islamist tendencies, illustrated by Islamist parties' different strategies towards the state, civil society and external partners such as the European Union (EU). This paper will focus more specifically on the two major Islamist political parties in Algeria, the Movement of Society for Peace (*Harakat al Moujtama' As-Silm*, MSP; formerly called Hamas) and the National Reform Movement (*Harakat al-Islah al Watani* or *el-Islah*, MNR). After having been founded clandestinely in the 1970s, these parties became components of the official Algerian opposition in the 1990s. This 'officialising' of some Islamist movements by the Algerian government occurred after the failure of revolutionary Islamist strategies, in particular those of the Islamic Salvation Front (*al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya lil-Inqad*, FIS) banned by the Algerian regime in 1992.¹ The MSP and MNR have adapted their ideology to the daily concerns of civil society, moving away from their previous revolutionary posture. This evolution demonstrates how Islamism as a social movement is today one of the most important forces for change in the region, having spread to different sectors such as trade unions, women's associations, young people and students, and even networks of businessmen.

By reporting on the views of Algerian Islamists towards European Union policies, this paper reinforces the need to understand the far reaching and complex dynamics of change within Islamism.² The views of Algerian Islamists reveal that the challenge of including Islamist movements in Euro-Mediterranean relations is not only related to the need for the EU to rethink its relations with specific political actors, but also to the EU's capacity to propose a democratisation programme that is more credible for Arab civil society as a whole.

The Evolution of the MSP and the MNR

The MSP was created in 1990. The history of the MSP is closely linked to that of its founder, Mahfoudh Nahnah. Born in 1938, this teacher of Arabic started his preaching activities at the end of the 1970s and was an opponent of President Houari Boumediene's regime. In 1977, he carried out sabotage operations by demolishing electricity pylons and was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Pardoned by the following President, Chadli Bendjedid, Nahnah was then reported by various sources to have made a commitment to the security services to be less extreme in his preaching. He is also said to have promised to abstain from any association with Islamist groups which were critical of the authorities.

Following the October 1988 Algiers youth riots, Nahnah was asked by Ali Benhadj, a young preacher, to take part in setting up the FIS. He refused and instead decided to create his own association – Guidance and Reform (*Al-Irshad wa-l-Islah*). This association was seen as a non-political organisation for religious education, preaching and charity work that was largely

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¹ On the question of the failure of political Islam to impose an Islamic state on the regime, see, among others, Roy (1992) and Kepel (2000). For a description of the dynamics of the evolution of Islamist parties, see, among others, Dale, Eickelman and Piscatori (1996); Beinín & Stork (eds) (1997); Hafez (2003) and Wiktorowicz (ed.) (2004).

² Ismail (2001).

financed by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), with which Nahnah sympathised ideologically. In 1990, the association became a political party under the name of Movement for an Islamic Society (*Harakat li-Mujtama' Islami*, MSI; later Hamas). Its political activities were complemented by important social actions ranging from employment to helping families, assisting widows and the poor, as well as providing access to medical care.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Hamas has focused on cooperating with the state. Nahnah supported the government's decision to interrupt the electoral process of 1992 (Hamas received only 5.3% of the votes during the legislative elections of 1991). During the 1990s the party condemned terrorist violence by the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS, the armed-wing of the FIS) as well as the repressive policies of the Algerian security services. This intermediary position cost Hamas the lives of nearly 50 senior party members, who were killed by terrorist acts.

In 1995, Nahnah was invited by the Algerian regime to re-launch the democratic process and decided to take part in elections (especially the presidential ones), highlighting his strategy of participation in the official political process. He put himself forward as a candidate in the 1995 presidential elections and officially won 25% of the votes, coming second to the Algerian army's candidate, Liamine Zeroual. In 1997, following a law on political parties that banned any ideological use of Islam, Hamas became the Movement of Society for Peace. It then switched its slogan from '*Islam is the solution*' to '*Peace is the solution*'. In the 1997 legislative elections, the MSP officially secured nearly 7% of the votes in parliament and 69 seats, becoming the fourth most powerful political party in the country. But the Algerian state did not give the MSP the opportunity to run in the 1999 presidential elections.

Thus, since 1997, the MSP has been part of different government coalitions and is today a member of the Presidential Alliance, comprised of the MSP, the Algerian National Front (*Jabhat at-Tahrir al-Watani*, FLN) and the National Democratic Rally (*at-Tajammu' al-Watani ad-Dimuqrati*, RND). But this policy of participatory strategies had negative consequences for the MSP as in the 2002 legislative elections it only won 7% of the votes and 38 seats, half the number of seats that it had in 1997. Mahfoud Nahnah died in 2003 and was replaced as party leader by Aboujerra Soltani. Since 2002, the MSP has held five ministerial portfolios – Mustapha Benbada, as Small and Medium-sized Businesses Minister; El Hachemi Djaaboub, as Industry Minister; Smaïl Mimoun, as Fisheries Minister; Amar Ghoul, as Minister of Public Works; and Aboujerra Soltani, as Minister of State without portfolio.³

The MNR was created in 1999 by Abdallah Djaballah. Born in 1956, Djaballah was among the first activists on Algerian campuses to begin spreading Islamism in its political form. After having studied Islamic sciences in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s,⁴ Djaballah returned to Algeria where he presided over an Islamist association called *Al Jama'a al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic group). In 1990 he founded his own party – the Islamic Renaissance Movement (*Harakat an-Nahdha al-Islamiyya* or *an-Nahda*). Even though close to the political perspectives of the FIS, Djaballah refused to be associated with its creation. Djaballah's successive parties incorporated a high number of former FIS activists and voters after the latter's prohibition in 1992.

With *an-Nahda*, Djaballah won 34 seats during the legislative elections of 1997, becoming the fourth largest power in parliament. In 1998 he had to face the hostility of a large number of *an-Nahda*'s activists who decided to expel him, following his refusal to be co-opted by the Algerian government. It was at this point that he created the MNR. Just before founding the

³ For a more complete list of MSP officials and their programme, see the MSP website (in Arabic), <http://www.hmsalgeria.net/>.

⁴ Willis (1998).

MNR, Djaballah had run for the presidential elections of 1999 as a free candidate, but decided with all the other opposition actors to withdraw from the electoral process before the vote. In the 2002 legislative elections, the MNR became the third most powerful political force and the leader of the Islamist parties with 43 seats. Djaballah was again a candidate in the 2004 presidential elections, finishing third with 5% of the votes.⁵

In sum, from starting as clandestine organisations with a revolutionary discourse, the MSP and MNR have transformed themselves into conservative pillars of Algerian society and the state. With a pro-nationalist stance, they are highly sensitive to the value given to the Islamic part of Algerian identity regarding the state and its institutions. They present themselves as defenders of the national Islamic characteristics of the country. They now insist that Algeria is already Islamic, toning down their demands for an Islamic state. A former MSP member of parliament for the region of Béjaïa argues: ‘Algeria is a Muslim country; the call for prayer can be heard, Ramadan is observed, women increasingly wear the veil, so talking about the Islamicisation of society when the country is already a Muslim country is a false problem’.

State co-optation has led to a greater professionalisation of these parties, around the notion of *musharaka* (partnership).⁶ They see themselves as embarking upon a practical apprenticeship of more day-to-day management and less revolutionary policy issues. The MNR supposedly represents the opposition to the more co-opted MSP, but aligns itself with the government when Islamic national identity is challenged, especially when political exchanges with the West occur. One MSP politician explains:

We are currently in the presidential coalition, which means that we are no longer in the opposition. However, we are not exercising power as the two other parties (RND and FLN). We were obliged to take part in the democracy building process because the context was specific, but we always express our differences when we have to. We enjoy this independence.⁷

The MNR leader insists:

⁵ This article was written and edited before the Algerian legislative elections of May 2007. The MNR underwent much turmoil during these elections. In fact, in February 2007 the Algerian Prime Minister Abdelaziz Belkhadem refused the participation of the MNR in the next legislative elections, without them having held their congress before the closing of the lists. Djaballah put forward the notion of a plot, since the requests by his party to hold a congress had been systematically refused by the government.

This implicit refusal by the government to see Djaballah take part in the elections is also echoed by complaints within the dissident wing of the MNR, led by Mohamed Boulahya. Numerous MNR militants denied Abdallah Djaballah the right to stand in the 2007 elections, arguing that his mandate as president ended in 2004 and had not been renewed by elections within the party. Djaballah therefore lost the presidency of his party to Mohamed Boulahya in April 2007. Finding himself excluded from the party he founded, as in 1998 with his En-Nahda party, Djaballah called for a boycott of the 2007 elections while promising to return to the political scene soon at the head of a new party he would create. We should remember that Djaballah succeeded in making the MNR the second most powerful political force after the elections in 2002. The legislatives of May 2007 have recorded a historically low level of participation at 36,51 %. The absence of Djaballah from the electoral race has therefore benefited the Islamic MSP party with 52 seats. The other traditional parties remain in power with 136 seats for the FLN and 61 seats for the RND. The new MNR led by Mohamed Boulahya has only secured 3 seats. The Algerian assembly numbers a total of 389 MPs.

⁶ Hamladji (2002).

⁷ Abdelkrim Dahmene, Foreign Relations representative of the MSP.

I am just positioning myself as an official Algerian party. When I am discussing EuroMed issues, I am doing it as an Algerian party, looking at issues which concern Algeria as a nation. They call us Islamists, but this is not a dialogue among religions that I am trying to manage! For me Islam is a complete system with its faith, economic, social, legal and political aspects. But I am doing it above all as an Algerian.⁸

The MNR has made alliances with clearly non-religious parties such as the Rally for Culture and Democracy (*at-Tajammu' min 'ajl at-taqafah wad-Dimuqratiyya*, RCD) and the Worker's Party (*Hizb al-'Ummal*, PT) which it then considered to be the only true opposition parties (apart from itself), after having said previously that secular parties were anti-constitutional – Islam being the religion of the Algerian State.

One impact of this party professionalisation has been the weakening of ties with the grassroots. The two parties have lost their influence on the ground as Islamic associations. With their support for the state's national reconciliation initiative⁹ they also under-estimated the size of the anti-state Islamist electorate, thought to be around four million people. This is worth noting when the EU seems keen to dialogue with Islamist parties based on the belief that they are representative of the masses; in practice, their principles and concept of membership are often very elitist. Faced with a process of more and more Islamists becoming middle class, many former activists are turning to Salafism.¹⁰

So, while the MSP and MNR have succeeded politically by accepting co-optation, many of their supporters still vote for them in protest at Western policies and state authoritarianism. The parties run political education programmes that the activists will not find elsewhere. They also organise meetings to comment on current news. Activists and supporters also see in these parties a socialising element which allows them to find a network of solidarity among members, helping them to get married, to set up businesses (via investment vehicles known as tontines) or to find accommodation. The parties also often benefit from the vote of activists from other banned Islamist parties, as was the case with some of the FIS votes going to the MNR in 2002.

The process of professionalisation also obliged the MSP and the MNR to rethink the 'grey zones'¹¹ of their policies with regards to democracy. How do you continue to be opponents and set yourself apart as Islamists, while at the same time playing the inclusion card? Instead of adopting a politically Islamist programme, these parties prefer to present themselves as defenders of Islamic virtue and morals. The MSP continues to be vague on the rights of religious minorities. It also took issue with the government decision to remove the teaching of the Koran from the baccalaureate. In 2004 the MNR proposed the law forbidding alcohol imports, and also opposed the revision of the Algerian family code, which aimed at giving more independence to women in family affairs:

Our party is the target of those who want to impose an imported project of society to Algeria and who want the Westernisation of the nation. Our project of society is democratic. Islam and nationalism are its two main pillars.¹²

⁸ Interview with Abdallah Djabellah, former leader of the MNR.

⁹ The national reconciliation charter was proposed by President Bouteflika in order to pardon crimes committed during the Algerian civil war.

¹⁰ 'Youridoun moughadarat al-bilad wa bad' safha jadda: Shabab Jazairiyoun tarakou al-silah ila al-Ouslah wa Khaybat al-Amal', *Al-Hayat*, 23 May 2000 - (They want to leave the country and move on: young Algerians are giving up weapons in solitude and despair).

¹¹ Brown et al (2006).

¹² An activist from the MNR.

This focus on morals is designed to win popularity among the masses, without frustrating strategies of alliance-building with the state. Thus, Menasra, the MSP's second in command, explained that the party agrees with the RND when it comes to the economy because it advocates the opening of markets. Its differences with the FLN are a lot more to do with religion and freedoms. The MNR often allies with extreme left-wing parties in order to denounce election fraud, national resources privatisation or to defend lawyers' independence and labour union's rights. The political programmes of the MNR¹³ and the MSP are imprecise, often supporting government policies while distinguishing themselves as 'Islamic'. As professional and legalised parties, both organisations are re-thinking their place not only in their national context, but also with external actors such as the EU. They have increased contacts in Europe, where they often send representatives to present their programme, carry out interfaith dialogue and participate in discussions on Arab reform.

Activities with European Muslims

Algerian Islamists express strong interest in political action linked in one way or another to Europe. Their own presence in Europe is partly due to the fact that the scope for political action has been so limited within Algeria. After the interruption of the electoral process in 1992, many Islamist leaders, activists and supporters left the country and settled down in France, Great Britain, Germany and Belgium. In France, exiled members of the FIS created the Algerian Brotherhood of France (FAF).

Islamists' political struggle could be pursued via transnational opposition, representing a deterritorialisation¹⁴ of Islamist activity from Algeria to Europe. Islamist movements used available political structures in Europe (through Islamic councils, the presence of imams in the local mosques, and by joining Islamic associations that already existed in Europe). Some former FIS activists became members of the Union of Islamic Organisations of France (Union des Organisations Islamiques de France, UOIF),¹⁵ the main federation of Islamic associations in the country, and a pillar of the French Council of the Muslim Worship (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman, CFCM), which was created in 2003 with the support of the then Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, to represent the interests of Muslims in France.

Europe represented a land of exile for some Algerian Islamists, but also an opportunity to use European Islamic structures to defend Muslim minority rights. In the 1990s, Algerian Islamists decided to use associative frameworks rather than political parties for their activities on Islamic issues. These associations aimed at controlling the activities of a new type of activist – young

¹³ For a general view of the MNR programme, see <http://www.elislah.net/> (in Arabic).

¹⁴ Roy (2002).

¹⁵ Committed to a strategy of using associations at national and European level, the UOIF became a major player in the re-Islamicisation of young European Muslims by proposing a range of social services (school support, psychological and legal help for families, among others) and religious services. It is part of a supranational structure whose headquarters, is the UK-based *Union des Organisation Islamiques en Europe* (UOIE), led by a Briton of Iraqi origin, Ahmed al-Rawi. The UOIF manages around 30 mosques throughout France, including in Bordeaux (800 seats) and Lille (1,200 seats). Every spring, it organises an event in France, the Congress of Bourget, bringing together nearly 50,000 people from all over Europe. Mahfoud Nahnah, the founder of the MSP used to give a lecture there every year. Currently, it is MSP President Aboujerra Soltani who speaks on behalf of the movement. In 2006, his speech was about the 'Ethics of Dialogue'. Also, numerous imams who operate in French mosques are linked to the MSP and the MNR.

Muslims born in Europe. These associations led campaigns to integrate Muslims into the European political and social landscape, calling on them to join electoral lists and vote¹⁶.

The UOIF started off with an Islamist heritage but gradually shifted its activities to the defence and integration of Muslims in Europe. Founded in 1983 by a group of Tunisian and other Middle Eastern political refugees and Islamist students, the UOIF was destined to become the host organisation of exiled Islamists. Linked to the international Muslim Brotherhood, the UOIF initially had a strong Islamist tradition and had little interest in action in the host country. Towards the end of the 1980s, it changed direction, convinced of the relevance of and need for being active in France and Europe. The UOIF took up the cause of the young veiled students who were excluded from schools in 1989, organising demonstrations and alerting the media. It also tried to ban the publication in French of the *Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. More recently, it called on members of the Muslim community to mobilise through petitions, demonstrations and boycotts to bring an end to Islamophobic representations of the prophet Mohammed during the recent cartoon affair. Some MSP activists and supporters, such as Okacha Ben Ahmed, Secretary General of the UOIF, and Fethi Belabdelli, former president of the UOIF student section, known as the Muslim Students of France (EMF), were among the senior officials of the UOIF. With Algerian roots, they were active in Algeria through the General Free Students' Union (UGEL), which had close ties to the MSP, before moving to France to pursue their higher education. When they arrived in France, they continued their activism in the Muslim students' association Muslim Students of France (EMF), present in twenty French universities. They then joined the management structures of the UOIF. Islamist parties were not present as such in Europe, preferring to work with cultural associations, either creating new associations, or joining existing organisations.

Undermining the extent to which Algerian Islamist parties view Europe as a normative model, they are now mobilising from their home countries to defend European Muslims. During the 33rd session of foreign ministers of member countries of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in 2006, Aboujerra Soltani proposed setting up a mechanism to fight the Islamophobia he claims is rife in the West:

Its aim is to bring Islamic states to pass laws to fight this phenomenon and work towards adopting a UN resolution to protect Islam and its symbols. The Algerian proposal calls for the creation of an Islamic fund to support efforts to combat Islamophobia in Western countries and to promote the values of dialogue and tolerance between cultures, religions and civilisations. It also puts the emphasis on the need for Islamic countries to impose economic boycotts against countries that encourage Islamophobia. The proposal sets out a series of measures – mobilisation of Muslim NGOs working in Europe and stepping up cooperation with the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It also advocates closer dialogue with political parties, decision-makers and NGOs to influence the content of school programmes that circulate a ‘distorted image’ of Islam passed from generation to generation.¹⁷

With more than a million Algerian nationals living in Europe, mainly in France, the MSP and MNR see these immigrants and their dual-nationality children as a significant pool of voters that can be mobilised during election campaigns. These parties' election campaigns will therefore also be targeted at their compatriots living in Europe. In the words of an official from the MSP network in France:

¹⁶ Amel Boubekeur, (2007, forthcoming).

¹⁷ Abdelkamel (2006).

There is a quota share of parliamentary seats reserved for Algerians in France. The authorities organise elections in the consulates to elect these MPs. So, in the MSP we target our campaign in France at Algerian nationals by distributing leaflets or organising little meetings. The aim is to woo the immigrant voters. We engage in politics here in France to win the elections; we try to have a network within the Algerian community in Europe. We also have a party representative in each consulate.

In the case of the MSP, the idea is also to maintain the feeling of national belonging amongst Algerian nationals and to carry out a cultural development policy between the two countries. According to an MSP official:

The MSP's policy on immigration is to act as a bridge between the immigrants and their country of origin. We also want to take part in bringing France and Algeria closer together. Personally, I've tried to twin two towns – one Algerian and the other French – we have had meetings with French and Algerian doctors, researchers, etc. Having a network is really our first objective. All moderate Muslims in France and Algeria vote for us even if they are not members because they recognise themselves in our discourse. Now with the beurs [second-generation North Africans living in France], it is true that it doesn't really work for all Algerian parties. They are much more interested in French politics. We prefer that they take an interest in France but if they can do both that's good.

During the 1997 presidential elections, the MSP candidate Mahfoud Nahnah came first in the Algerian consulates of Strasbourg, Nice and Grenoble, well ahead of the candidate winning the presidential elections, Liamine Zeroual. Although dissolved since 1992, the FIS is also trying to orientate the votes of Algerians abroad. Rabah Kébir, head of the FIS executive delegation, who took refuge in Germany for a long time, called on Algerians to vote for Abdellaliz Bouteflika during the 2002 presidential elections. He also invited the different Islamists living in Europe to come to Algerian consulates abroad to benefit from a law on civil concord, promulgated in 2000, whose aim was to grant amnesty to those responsible for crimes during the civil war. In short, Algerian Islamists' views on what Europe should do are partly related to their own differing degrees of embeddedness within European policies.

The Failure of Europe as a Democratic Model

The bitterness over Algeria's civil conflict in the 1990s and the fact that European governments largely supported the military regime's harsh tactics against Islamists have ensured that Algerian Islamists have a particularly critical perspective of EU policies. Unsurprisingly, the common view is that the EU actively collaborated in the repression of Algerian Islamists' democratic rights. Significantly, this legacy from the 1990s can still be seen in Algerian Islamists' views towards more recent EU initiatives. Interviews reveal that Algerian Islamists are particularly critical of new democracy promotion policies pursued under the EMP, decrying Europe's supposed determination to impose its own values through its cooperation programmes. Another frequent reproach by Islamists is that Europe should work to ensure respect for the rights of Muslims in Europe rather than try to influence the orientations of Muslim civil societies in the Arab world.¹⁸

The EU's refusal to recognise the democratic electoral victory of Hamas in the Palestinian Occupied Territories has further undermined the credibility of EU discourse on democratisation amongst Algeria's Islamists. Today, a number of Islamist party leaders and activists are considering the possibility of an 'Islamic democracy', that is, a democratic system inspired in large measure by the European democratic model and Islam, but with a distinctive set of beliefs

¹⁸ Interviews with several members of various Islamist parties and structures.

independent of Europe's 'whims'.¹⁹ During the interviews carried out for this chapter, the majority of Islamist players declared that they did not reject the possibility of becoming more democratic '*thanks to Europe*' and its support, but not '*like Europe*'. What they dispute is the necessity of conforming to European demands and of acting in response to the democratisation programmes proposed by Europe – from which they are invariably excluded. Algerian Islamists also oppose what they judge to be Europe's security objectives for promoting democracy. They believe this leads to a form of democracy promotion geared towards European allies' stability, energy interests, counter-terrorism and the condition of amenability on Israeli-Palestinian issues. All this is seen as being to the detriment of high quality, genuine democracy, with direct effects on civil society and opposition parties (particularly through freedom of expression and access of the masses to the political sphere).

The US and Europe are both criticised for wanting a democratisation of their own choosing, realising that the democratisation dynamics they have long been advocating will not necessarily produce the political result they are seeking for the stability of their dealings in the region.²⁰

I was at this [European] conference and they were wondering how to be more efficient on the democratisation process in the region. Honestly, I was sceptical about their proposals as I saw how they support the undemocratic aspects of our governments, or with regards to their unfairness towards the Palestinian occupation or the Hamas victory! For these reasons I always prefer to talk about the need for a dialogue with the EU than for genuine cooperation.²¹

The EU's disregard for cases of torture and abusive detention of Islamist activists, the exclusion of trade unions dominated by Islamists from Euro-Mediterranean networks, and the intercultural aspect given to inter-religious dialogue have also given credence to Algerian Islamists' perception that the EU seeks to export a profoundly secular European conception of democracy, leaving very little room for the expression of religious identities.

The West was living in darkness while we had Andalusia, Al Qarawiyyine [an Islamic university in Morocco]. They began to learn about justice, citizenship or even the relationship between people and the state when we had all this for 1,000 years! Why are they silent on the legacy of the 'South' in today's Europe? What about St Augustine? What about Constantine I? Islam is *dine wa daoula* [religion and state affairs]. We cannot have religious beliefs [*'aqida*] without a law [*shari'a*]. This is also the way Europe has been built, between faith and jurisdiction, and now they are going through a major identity crisis. I want them to talk about Islam from an Islamic perspective, not only from their own conception. I do not talk about democracy because it is already in my Islamic culture. Democratising a religious party [*hizb dini*] sounds strange to me! Thinking in terms of 'Islamism versus democratisation' is the sign that the West refuses to understand my conception of governance, politics etc.²²

Accordingly, the democratisation initiatives promoted by the EU seem no longer to inspire confidence among Algerian Islamists, who have difficulty in identifying with these. A reflection in the EU on Islamic political and social values could help dissipate Muslim countries' 'impression of cultural imperialism'²³ in Europe's attempts to promote democracy in the region.

¹⁹ Sayyid (1997).

²⁰ Causse III (2005).

²¹ Interview with Abdelkrim Dahmene.

²² Interview with Abdallah Djabellah.

²³ Gillespie & Youngs (2003).

Europe should in this sense be open to ‘an Islamic ethic of democracy.’²⁴ Europe has not considered drawing on resources in support of democracy and human rights from within the Islamic heritage, such as the concept of *shura* (fair consultation in a policy-making process), respect for law, the central role of moral values such as equality and social justice. It is here that Algeria’s Islamists feel that their basic beliefs and political orientations remain poorly understood by European governments:

OK, we are heirs of the Islamist tendency. But today we are inspired by the European Christian democrat experience. Islamist is a highly pejorative term for Europe. Our movements are not well understood. I understand myself as a Muslim democrat. Our specific Islamic values are indeed universal. I even think that we can be a model for Europe’s transforming identity.²⁵

Talking about Islamism is the sign of Europe’s ignorance. This is my right to refuse this imported distinction between secular parties considered democratic and so-called religious parties which should be democratised. Islamic political thought does not differentiate between Islamic parties and non Islamic ones. The West is able to develop democratic tools such as parties, institutions and parliaments, and I can adopt and use these tools. But it doesn’t mean that I am going to give up my Islamic culture and its philosophy in order to imitate imperialist and rogue states which call themselves democracies!²⁶

Including elements of Islamic philosophy in the arguments in favour of democracy does not, however, mean locking this issue into an Islamic framework. What Europe has to avoid in this type of approach, however, is reducing democratisation in the South to a sort of intercultural dialogue between the two parties, legitimating therein the use of political norms different from those applying to political players in the North. It is precisely the argument of an ‘Islamic cultural specificity’ that has enabled the authoritarianism of certain Islamist actors and Arab states to monopolise Islam as a resource, and to crack down on all attempts at opposition and change. Paying heed to the requests of civil societies and what they are trying to build, and thus ensuring their representation in institutions in these countries, will consequently be more effective than the North’s current obsession with the question of ‘Arab reform’, without, moreover, managing to identify the reformers. It would also be illusory and superficial to consider the Islamists as the new ‘miracle’ political protagonists of the region, after the EU had erred in treating them for so long as the ‘untouchables of the democracy assistance world’.²⁷

Areas of Potential Collaboration with Europe

While the West, and in particular the US, is almost unanimously condemned by ‘Arab public opinion’ for its policy in the wider Middle East (war in Iraq, support for Israel on the Palestinian and Lebanese issues), European administrations have chosen to reflect on their more or less official ties with representatives of legalised Islamist movements in the Maghreb and in the Middle East since the attacks of 11 September 2001. How, in the space of a decade, did Islamist actors who were previously considered enemies become potential dialogue partners? This can partly be explained by changing Western strategy in the management of the Islamist phenomenon, and partly by the changing position of the Islamists themselves towards the West.

²⁴ Tibi (2005).

²⁵ Interview with Aboujerra Soltani, leader of the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP).

²⁶ Interview with Abdallah Djabellah.

²⁷ Youngs (2004).

For the MSP much more than the MNR the new challenge is about developing networks outside Algeria via meetings, conferences and seminars where diplomats, politicians, senior civil servants and Islamist party officials meet. By developing relations of this kind, party representatives can present their often poorly known programme to the outside world – while gaining kudos within Algeria as central political actors able to muster international networks and support. However, it should be underlined that Islamists in Algeria are not doing it as well as their Moroccan neighbours, for example. This isolation is partly due to the Algerian civil war of the 1990s. Following these events, a party such as the MNR does not seem to have benefited from a renewed interest among European policy makers. The MNR's marginalisation acted clearly to the benefit of the active external work of the MSP which appears as more moderate to the West and enjoys assets that the MNR lacks, such as multilingual activists.

I am not asking anything. I don't ask people who stigmatise me. I had exchanges with the EU in the 1990s but since the national crisis is over and we don't appear as dangerous for their democracy anymore, I feel that they don't want to learn about what so-called Islamist parties really are. They only want to discuss with parties that have renounced their Islamic identity.²⁸

In the chapter devoted to external relations policies in the 2004 MRN programme for the presidential elections,²⁹ there is coverage of the North African region, Africa, the Islamic space and the Arab region, but the MNR does not deal with Europe or even with the West as such. It is only under the terms of 'international organisations' and the 'worldwide space' that a partnership with Europe is suggested. 'Encouraging the culture of dialogue and positive reciprocity', 'Rejecting nuclear proliferation and preserving peace and security in the Mediterranean region', and 'Encouraging economic and scientific exchanges' are for the MNR examples of possible areas of collaboration with the EU.

Alongside Muslim communities present in Europe, there is an effort to establish a political dialogue with EU member states both at a structural (parties, policies, trade unions) and intellectual or semi-political (think tanks, foundations, universities, among others) level.

We do have formal exchanges with ambassadors from EU member states in Algeria. Encounters outside Algeria are mainly done through our parliamentary roles and do not allow us to build direct relationships. Exchanges at an institutional level are still complicated but other structures are more yielding such as European political parties, European think tanks or foundations. With these structures we have exchanges on the issue of reform and not only on the Islamist issue. The European Union should better understand why it is not successful in achieving reform in the Arab world and increasing its dialogue with the whole civil society. In any case, we are looking for any type of partners in terms of dialogue. Cooperation issues will depend on the interests of each other.³⁰

This paper has demonstrated that the official entry of Algeria's Islamist parties into politics has had two results: deradicalisation and professionalisation. Having dropped their revolutionary trappings and become committed to the political management of the daily problems of their voters, these parties should be prepared to participate in cooperation programmes from which the EU, in the opinion of a large part of Arab civil societies, should no longer exclude them.

The partnership that the EU could develop with Islamist parties should relate to sector-specific programmes in the region, differentiating the political, social and economic lines of action. There is no need to envisage new programmes specifically created for Islamist actors and their

²⁸ Abdellah Djabellah, op. cit.

²⁹ Harakat al-Islah al Watani, *al-Barnamaj al-Siyasi (MNR Political programme)*, 2004.

³⁰ Aboujerra Soltani, op. cit.

organisations but simply to encourage their inclusion in already existing ones. Again, Islamists should be considered as political actors. Since Algeria has a long history of cooperation with Europe, the interest of its Islamist parties in the policies of the EU is strong, as compared with elsewhere in the Middle East. Nevertheless, European policies towards the region are still not well-known by Algerian Islamists. So the EU, especially via its delegations in the countries concerned, needs to work to increase the visibility of its main programmes such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Policy. It will be particularly important to associate grassroots activists and Islamic civil society associations in these training activities on Europe. The emphasis should be placed on the political nature of Islamist actors and their parties, and thus differentiate the political approach of Islamists from the religious or intercultural one. Members of these parties need to acquire specific skills and align their experience with international political practices. Exchanges of experiences between Maghreb Islamist parties and European foundations and political parties should be promoted both by member states at a national level and by the EU as part of Euro-Mediterranean exchanges (notably via the Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly).

The EU should promote work to strengthen national institutions that do not exclude Islamist parties. Mainly, it is only civil servants chosen by governments who have so far benefited most from MEDA programmes to strengthen institutions. Professional norms should be strengthened, notably through parliamentary experience, and cooperation with secular parties should be strongly encouraged. The broad issue of democratisation should also leave room for joint work on specific points where the institutions can address social problems. This cooperation in an institutional framework will also allow Islamists to gain credibility by clarifying their positions on the so-called 'grey areas' – women's rights, religious minorities, morals in public life, among others.

To ensure that the partnership evolves and continues to concern actors from the South, the EU must promote the existence of independent national structures, making it possible to assess, criticise and propose adjustments to European policies for the region. The lesson from Algeria's Islamists is that bringing Islamists into this kind of structure would help counter the feeling that the EU only proposes a Euro-centred democratisation that does not meet the expectations of local communities.³¹

³¹ For a full comparative analysis between Algerian and Moroccan Islamist parties and their links with the EU see: Boubekeur & Amghar (2006)

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