

Primary Source:

Ismael Urbain's French-Arab Kingdom



Key Facts

- When the French invaded Algiers, the army destroyed records and exiled the existing leadership. They had almost no knowledge of local languages and customs. All this made it very difficult for them to govern Algiers effectively
- In 1833 the Army created a research branch called the Arab Bureau that was staffed by specially trained scholars who learned Arabic or Berber. They saw themselves as social engineers testing the ideas of a political theorist named Henri de Saint-Simon. Considered “experts” on Islam and Algerians, they had a strong influence on the Army’s colonial policies
- They believed that “oriental” Islamic society would be “raised” to a higher level of civilization through positive “association” with French “Enlightened” civilization. Their goal was to control the development of Islamic institutions to fit French interests

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Key Facts

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Critical of European Actions and Attitudes

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Who Was Ismael Urbain?



Portrait of Alexis de Tocqueville, 1850

Ismael Urbain was an influential member of the Arab Bureau. Born in French Guinea in 1812, he was the son of a native woman named Appolline and a French businessman. He wrote in a letter shortly before his death that he had experienced prejudice as an illegitimate child of color and that this inspired him to “engage in the fight against prejudices and injustices . . .”

Urbain was brought to France and placed in boarding school when he was ten. He studied the social improvement theories of Saint-Simon and was quickly promoted to a prestigious position within the War Ministry. He decided to learn Arabic and convert to Islam to prove that it was possible for Islamic and Christian societies to work together, changing his name from Thomas to Ismael and moving to a Muslim

neighborhood in Constantine. He was highly respected in Muslim circles, especially after he married Djaimouna bent Massaoud, the twelve-year-old daughter of one of his Algerian friends.

Urbain’s decision to learn Arabic and convert to Islam meant that local Muslim populations saw him as a trustworthy representative. However he also remained deeply committed to the French Army’s mission of “transforming” and “uplifting” Arab society in alignment with French imperialist interests.

What Did Urbain Believe and Say about Algerian People?

Critical of European Actions and Attitudes

Throughout his career, Urbain made many enemies amongst the European civilian population in Algeria, because he was vocally critical of what he called their “exaggerated [and] naïve stories.” He complained that Europeans had ignorant and outdated diplomatic practices and that they never bothered to connect personally with Muslim populations:

“[They] live separate from [Muslims], not caring about their interests, their needs, their tendencies . . . I have seen the most erudite and civilized men . . . make statements concerning Muslims that seem [ignorant and backwards]. When it comes to Islam . . . modern civilization seems to have adopted the . . . biased ideas of another era. One would think the Crusades were a recent event.

[Our civil representatives] often display an arrogance in their actions and language that is profoundly hurtful to Muslims. Their milieu, the nature of the interests they are protecting . . . push them to disdain and suspect Islam.”

Advocated for Cultural Rapprochement

He insisted that in order for the French civilizing mission to succeed, Europeans must “free themselves of the narrow, unfair prejudices that ignorance, inertia, and sectarianism have created against Islam . . . There is no longer any irreconcilable hatred between Occident and Orient.”

Urbain vocally opposed “the rampant dispossession of native lands” and argued forcefully that French and Muslims could live together in mutual understanding: “There is nothing irreconcilable between the

Muslim indigènes and the French . . .” He pointed out that religious tolerance was a fundamental value of the French Enlightenment, remarking pointedly that “our primary concern is with citizens, not believers.”



Horace Vernet, The Taking of Constantine, Algeria, 1837

Association, Not Assimilation

According to Urbain, the French idea of “assimilating” Algerians (by forcibly imposing French laws and culture) was unrealistic due to the Algerians’ inferior social state:

“It is not possible to apply our institutions all at once to this population, who has only just been freed from a summary and brutal autocracy.”

He argued that although all societies are capable of progress, they do not progress in the same way:

“The idea of progress implies the multiplicity and the unity of human destiny . . . no nation, no religion can be a general model of progress; no one has the right to say “my laws, my customs . . . represent the final expression of human advancement.”

Instead of trying to aggressively assimilate Algeria by imposing French laws and customs, Urbain insisted that France must gradually draw Muslims “toward modernity,” first by sending a message of tolerance, then by showing them that they could benefit from following France’s lead: “Association is [a balance of] liberty and authority . . . tolerance for each other, determination of common interests, and absolute freedom of the individual.” France’s role was not to force Muslims to become French but to “call [out to them], show the way . . . teach by example.”



Algerians rest in front of a Kabyle home, c. 1889

Hierarchical Division of Labor

Put simply, Urbain believed that local Arab populations were much better farmers than the European settlers, while Europeans were much better at leading commerce and industry:

“The [settlers’ lack of farming experience] is certainly a greater inconvenience than the imperfection of the old indigenous system . . . France will furnish the intelligence needed for organization and direction, as well as capital and oversight . . . [and] the workers will be Muslim Algerians. [Settlers will do] the work of management and surveillance.”

He argued that harmoniously hierarchical division of labor “will establish morally, through living fact, the true superiority of the metropolitan over the indigenous state . . . without damaging the idea of political equality and without betraying our social customs.”

At the top of the hierarchy should be the French monarchy in Paris, who he felt was equally responsible for the welfare of both French and Algerian subjects. He advised Napoleon III to “ease tensions [and] maintain benevolent relations between the two races . . . The state has no special obligation to assist any particular class of co-citizens. Equality, which we invoke when it comes to paying dues, must it not also preside [in all matters of government]?”



Market in Blidah, Algeria

Image Citations

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Algerian signing French papers, Marcel Boucherie, “Les bureaux arabes: leur rôle dans la conquête de l’Algérie,” Revue no. 149 Juillet 1957, pp. 1052-1066, Fair Use, <https://www.defnat.com/e-RDN/vue-article.php?carticle=1104&cidrevue=149>

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