# Visions of a New Nation, 1920–1930

## Core Questions

- How did the experience of colonialism lead Algerians to develop new identities for themselves?
- How did it lead them to develop new visions for the future in the 20th century?

# 3 Quotes

**Quote 1:** "Most often the soldier returning from the front has a high idea of his superiority . . . he imagines that many things are owed to him, which is in fact true but only up to a point. He is authoritarian, his atavistic submission replaced by an assertiveness which is often misplaced . . ." – Administrator of mixed commune La Calle, Rapport periodique sur l'état d'esprit des indigènes, Administrateur de la commune mixte la Calle au Gouverneur général, 1916, Archives nationales d'outre mer, Carton B3 151.

**Quote 2:** "A principle which must remain above all discussion . . . is that of the predominance of French action . . . electoral and political rights . . . are incompatible with this necessity." – M. Ebert, General Councilor of Algeria, Proces verbaux du Conseil général d'Algérie, Conseilleur Ebert, 3 avril 1914, Archives nationales d'outre mer, Carton 4 G 2.

**Quote 3:** "Our Chadli, answer us! Where have you gone a a a hi, hi, hi? What are you doing? Why do you not return? O, O, ah! ah! . . . a collective pain, ritual and rythmic." – Kabyle1 mothers in mourning, as described in Charles Geniaux, "Pères Blancs pendant la Guerre," *Revue des deux mondes* (1916): 405–06.

**Quote Reflection Questions:**

- What are the different points of view expressed in these quotes?
- What is a question or observation they raise for you?
- Based on these quotes, what do you think

## Key Terms:

Emir Khaled

*The Chekaia*

Alima ben Chabane

Fourteen Points

Assimilation

Octave Depont

# Introduction: Emir Khaled

*Emir Khaled*

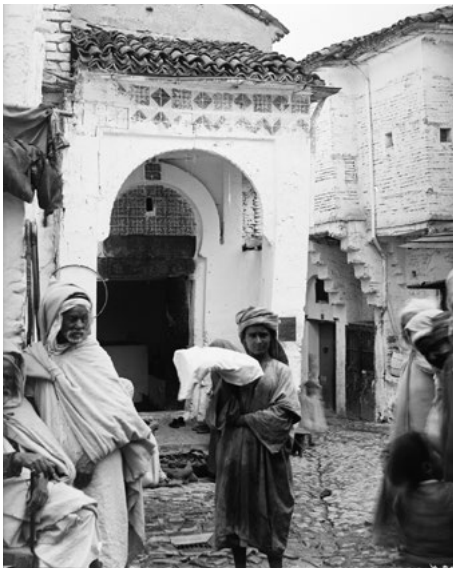
Perhaps no figure better personifies the paradoxical consequences of French colonial policy in Algeria than the Emir Khaled. Born *Khaled Ben El Hachemi El Jaza'iri*, Khaled was the grandson of a prince from western Algeria who was renowned for his repeated efforts to repel the French invasion in the early 19th century. Khaled grew up in Syria, where his family had been comfortably exiled on a French pension since 1845, and he was the product of a unique style of dual education. Raised by his family as a Muslim "aristocrat and Oriental," he was nonetheless sent to a French Lazarist preparatory school in Damascus and later to the prestigious French military academy of Saint-Cyr. The future "father of Algerian nationalism" visited Algeria for the first time only as a teenager, where he temporarily attended a European-style high school in the capital.

After some prodding from his father, Khaled joined the French army as a career officer and won several citations for bravery on the Western Front during the First World War. Right after the war ended, Khaled began to speak out publicly, advocating for equal rights for North Africans.

*Algerian Soldiers in Europe during World War I, ca. 1914-1915*

Replacing his French officer's uniform with a beard and traditional Islamic garments and styling himself "the Emir" to highlight his prestigious lineage, he traveled the Algerian countryside in an effort to unify Muslims in a common struggle against colonial inequality. "Thousands of us have died for a country which considers us as 'subjects' . . .," he complained bitterly in a 1924 speech, "forced to fight in defense of rights which [we] have never possessed . . .We fought in the front lines, but when it comes to rights, the only one [we have gained] is the right to be happy that we weren't killed!"

His energetic rhetoric won him a landslide victory in the first Muslim Algerian elections of 1919, but his success proved to be short-lived. The colonial government annulled the election results, accusing him of anti-French rhetoric and nationalist sympathies, and he quickly became isolated from the more moderate faction of the colonial reform movement, which saw him as a threat to the suc-



People gather outside a mosque in Constantine

-cess of their own political platform. After a short stint as a Muslim delegate to the French-dominated Financial Delegation (*Délégations financières*), he resigned and ultimately returned to Damascus, where he died in 1936 still protesting his loyalty to the ideals of the Universal French Republic.

In many ways, Khaled's personal trajectory mirrors the experiences of thousands of Algerian soldiers and workers. During the war, the French government had promised to honor and respect its soldiers of all backgrounds and to be a friend and benefactor to Muslims. And yet, after the war, government policy fell short of these expectations.

## What Did Algerian Veterans Come Home To?

At the end of the war, hundreds of thousands of workers and soldiers returned home to an Algeria that had changed significantly. From the perspective of colonial subjects, this could be summed up in four words: more poverty, less freedom.

Throughout the war, the Algerian home front made enormous economic contributions. Between 1914 and 1918, Algerian farmers sent 30 million liters of wine, 3.5 million cattle, and 1.5 million metric tons of grain, along with a wide range of products including fruit, eggs, couscous, vegetables, wool, natural plant fibers, minerals, and phosphates to France.

In 1915 the harvest failed, and at the same time, crops intended to feed local populations were forcibly requisitioned, leading to famine in many parts of the countryside. Populations in hard-hit southern regions began to migrate north in search of food, reaching the towns only to be turned away and told to return home.


Algerian men selling dates, Algeria, c. 1928

Paul Vermale, a military doctor who was stationed in the Sahara in 1915, recorded in his diary the misery he witnessed: "At the moment, we see such lamentable things here. Unhappy starving youngsters, skin shriveled, enormous stomachs and who eat God knows what . . .! They come next to the camp to scratch the earth and [look through] the garbage piles in quest of grains taken by the wind . . ."

And two weeks later, he wrote simply the following comment: "[They are] dying of hunger in the country . . . what skeletons! It's quite honestly frightening."

**Pause and reflect:** How would you feel in this situation? What might you do to survive?

*Press image of exports, October 22, 1916*

## Wives, Widows, and the Language of Rights

*Algerian women and children, c. 1904*

As we have already learned, Algerian colonial subjects employed a wide range of resistance strategies to survive and adapt to life under colonial rule. During World War I, they added a new strategy: framing their requests in the language of rights and citizenship. Wives and widows began to use their participation in the war effort to negotiate greater benefits for their communities and to resist colonial policies that they felt were unfair.

In a travelogue titled "The Chekaia," a French observer Charles Géniaux told the story of how he traveled deep into the Djurdjura Mountains in 1915 to visit a group of Catholic missionaries who lived amongst the local Kabyle population. On his way, he stopped at Fort National, where he was invited to observe an administrative custom called the *chekaia*, or "the grievance," a session in which the local French administrator meted out punishment, favors, and counsel at his whim. Géniaux explains that the day of the *chekaia*, he was surprised to see a great number of women who had come to claim wartime pensions for family members fighting at the front.

Replete with orientalizing language, Géniaux's account spares no detail, presenting readers with the minutia of the women's postures, dress, gestures, sounds, and smells:

> "Like a tigress coming out of her cage to enter the big box . . . an old woman, in a white toga, her waist cinched in a red scarf, her back arched, her legs bare, her dry brown hands held to her gray hair, so to greet, advances to touch the administrator . . .
>
> –"Back!" commands the gendarme in a terrible voice.
> – "Step back," said the interpreter gently.
> –"Speak," orders the administrator."

*Algerian woman performing the handkerchief dance*

Géniaux described how the woman's explanations were incoherent and that her father, an "old man with frighteningly skinny calves" was called in. However, his dirty clothes and odor "of rancid butter" indisposed the administrator from looking further into their situation.

Géniaux's language is fascinating and telling in itself, but what is most significant is the event he is describing. During the war, the *chekaia* became a site of interaction and negotiation between Algerian women and the colonial state.

Take, for example, the story of Alima ben Chabane, the jeweler's wife. During a fracas in the corridor, as the Algerian guard tried to prevent frustrated petitioners from crowding into the chamber, Géniaux wrote that he suddenly saw "a pretty young woman of sixteen, who walks forward as light as a sylph." She strode forward, removing a heavy, man's burnous to reveal a red embroidered gandoura, tied with an expensive silver belt around her waist. Her attitude was described as "almost insolent . . . kindly fierce" as she planted her foot and crossed her arms in front of the administrator's desk.

The interpreter translated her Amazigh words into French as she explained how her husband, Slimane the jeweler, had been killed by a soldier named Tahar, whom she subsequently married, making her a soldier's wife and entitling her to a pension. When chastised by the administrator for appearing too elegant and wealthy to warrant financial assistance, she glared at him and defiantly replied, "It's my right as a rifleman's [*tirailleur's*] wife." As the gendarme, named Meddour, pushed her out the door, she resisted, demanding that they pay her right away "in a guttural, wild, ardent voice."

*Moorish women, Algiers, Algeria*

What had motivated this woman to follow this course of action? We can imagine a hundred scenarios. One thing that stands out here is Alima's explicit claim, not to a favor or a privilege, but to a right, derived from her legal status as a war wife. One wonders if Alima heard this language of rights from her husband, from another family member, from other women, or from other members of her community.

These anecdotes, confirmed in the archives by numerous written petitions, show us how the language of rights spread rapidly during and after the war and in particular helped to draw Algerian women into the public sphere for the first time.

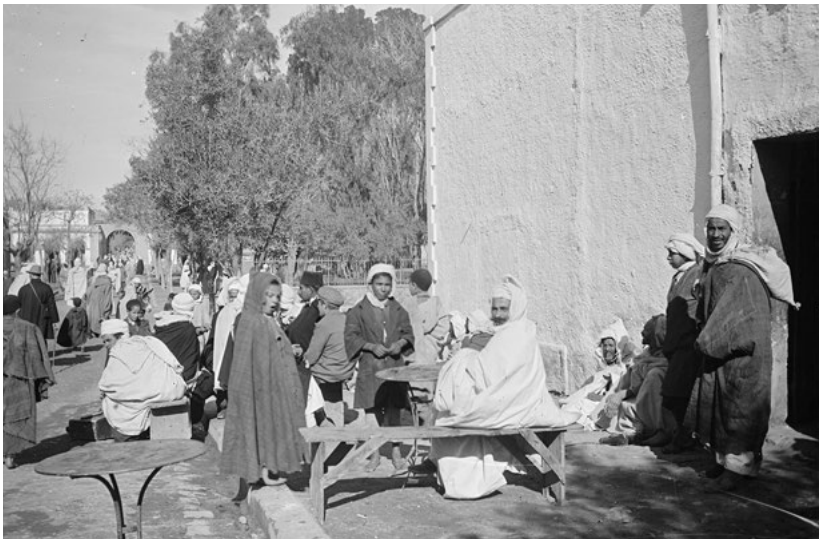
# 1919 Reforms

With the end of the war in 1918, the need to pass at least some reform became urgent, especially following the announcement of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points." Algerian intellectuals were galvanized and excited by the promise of the reforms. In 1919 Khaled wrote a letter to President Wilson, in which he eloquently argued that self-determination should apply to colonized peoples.

*City and port of Algiers, Algeria, 1921*

Unfortunately, the 1919 reforms managed to both disappoint Algerian reformers and to anger the settler electorate. Although Muslim electoral rights were expanded from five thousand to four hundred thousand electors, representing 43% of the adult male population, they were still only allowed to vote for indigenous representatives who had no decision-making power. Similarly, although Algerians could technically become French citizens, the rigorous requirements blocked eligibility for most people: They had to be 25 or older, monogamous, no criminal record, and have two years of fixed residence in addition to providing written proof that they were either a veteran, an elected official, a clerk in the colonial administration, a well-established property owner, or literate in French. Between 1919 and 1923, only 317 requests were made. The colonial administration denied 115 of them.

On the ground in Algeria, even these mild reforms were met with opposition and obstructionism by the colonial administration. Local administrators simply refused to obey the new laws, and the government council actually threatened to strike if Paris passed any further reforms. The colonial government argued that in fact, it was the colonists that should be rewarded with greater freedom for their cooperation during the war. Within two years they had succeeded in retracting parts of the reform, as the French foreign affairs department lost interest in Algeria and turned toward its new mandates in the Middle East.



*A café in Laghouat, Algeria, 1930*

In 1928 the colonial apologist Octave Depont published a book defending the reversal of the reforms, explaining that it would have been a mistake to trust Muslim Algerians, writing that although Algerian participation in the Great War had inspired the French with "generous thoughts," the native population had failed to "evolve" sufficiently and could simply not be trusted to remain "loyal" to France if given political rights.

*Octave Depont, 1921*

"Doubtless there are in North Africa . . . a few hundred Muslims elevated in our universities, who are capable . . . But they are not yet numerous enough to create, in the deep mass of the douars, a reasonable opinion of our country . . . [Rather than putting] the cart before the ox," he recommended, France needed to start by "weakening the barrier of Islam, which separates the natives from us."

He concluded that the best thing the French government could do was to continue to give the colonial administration full autonomy over native affairs:

Assimilation is over. In truth, it never could exist in a land where interests are in contradiction, a land which is not really European, but rather a sort of Oriental country, where the juxtaposition of the races . . . obliges the government to make do with experimental policies. Assimilation is a fundamentally chimeric idea.

## New Visions of the Future

So, what came next? Although the failure of the 1919 reforms convinced many Algerians that change was impossible, in fact the change had already begun. Algerian veterans had been exposed to a broader world and returned home armed with new ideas of rights and self-determination. Despite the efforts of the colonial administration to return to the status quo, Algerians of different regions and classes continued to advance their own visions of the future.

*A decorated Algerian leader greeting the French Governor General of Algeria on the centenary of the Algerian invasion, 1930*

To conclude this lesson, let's turn to the voices of three Algerian intellectuals of the time who each advocated for their own vision of liberation for Algerian society.

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# Image Citations

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