

## Primary Source: Cheikh Ben Badis



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#### Key Facts

“Straightforward  
Declaration” of  
the Association  
of Oulemas, April  
1936

### Key Facts

- Cheikh Ben Badis was educated at the Zituna mosque university in Tunis and became the undisputed leader of the Islamic reform movement during the interwar years
- In 1925, he and other prominent Islamic reformists (including Bashir Ibrahimi of Bougie and Cheikh Tayyib al-Uqbi of Biskra) began to publish journals calling for the purification and renaissance of Islam in Algeria and for the rejection of “assimilationist” ideas of gaining French rights and citizenship
- They promoted a return to a close interpretation of the Koran and the early Sunna, and at the same time stressed the need to pursue modern scientific scholarship<sup>1</sup>

## “Straightforward Declaration” of the Association of Oulemas, April 1936

*Cheikh Ben Badis founded the Association of Oulemas in 1931, an Islamic reformist organization. Although willing to work with the French, and eager to “catch up” in technological and material terms, Cheikh Ben Badis and the Islamic reformists were not assimilationists in the same sense as western-educated intellectuals such as Ferhat Abbas. They emphasized the existence of a distinguished and highly civilized Muslim Algerian nation and insisted upon collaboration with the French as cultural equals rather than as “primitive” cultural subordinates. Note, however, that the demand for cultural autonomy was accompanied by an acknowledgement of French political supremacy. Whereas Abbas focused on social and political emancipation on the basis of a common French identity, Ben Badis emphasized equality between two culturally distinct but politically unified “nations.”*

We live truly in an environment where confusion reigns over everything, from religion to customs to the economy. To all of this, our epoch has added a new confusion, perhaps the most serious, which marks the life of the nation: that of speaking in its name.



*A street in Sidi Okba, Algeria, 1899*

Today, in effect . . . not an orator raises his voice without boasting that he represents the whole Muslim community of this country nor without pretending that the words issuing from him are the expression of the [entire] Umma.<sup>1</sup> These orators could have been less verbose, less excessive, and less prolix. If they had said, for example, “We speak in the name of the party that elected us” or “in the name of the committee upon which we depend” or even “in the name of our clan” or “in the name of those whose

opinions we share or who think like us,” then their aims would have been more exact, their opinions sounder, and their discourse more likely to convince the junior officials and men of the people. We bring up this topic today after having seen the attack of the journal *Le Temps*, which the community was unanimous in opposing. . . .

According to certain local representatives, certain notables and high functionaries of this country, the Muslim Algerian community would like to be considered as purely French. It would have no *patrie*<sup>2</sup> besides France, [no] other objective than real and complete assimilation to France. To achieve this desire, it has no other hope than that France reach out her hand quickly [to it] . . .

. . . One of these eminent delegates is even said to have searched for Algerian nationalism in history without finding a trace of it, to have actually searched and to have discovered nothing worth mentioning. And, enlightened finally by the lights

1. This is an Arabic word that refers to the entire community of Muslim believers.

2. A country, homeland, or fatherland.

of revelation, it is he who cries, “France, it is me!” In this world, truly, everything progresses and everything evolves. [Even] to the point of mysticism, since just yesterday, a great mystic was saying: “God, I looked for you and I found myself. I am God.”

Today, the mystic of politics declares: “France I looked for you and I found myself. I am France.” Who then can deny [that] the modern Algerian has the capacity to evolve and to discover?



*Great Mosque, Algiers, Algeria, 1899*

These orators, who speak in the name of “Muslim Algerians,” who claim to represent Algerian Muslim opinion, these orators are knowingly mistaken. They depict themselves as other than they are, and they are about to create a great trench between reality and that which they are duty bound to feel. They have a point of view, the community has its own, and they would like for the high administration to have a third.



*Abdelhamid Ben Badis (on the left) and Tayeb El Oqbi (on the right) of the Association of Oulémas*

NO, sirs! We speak, we, in the name of a great part of the community<sup>3</sup> We claim even to speak in the name of the majority. So we say even to you who desire to listen and who must listen in order to understand the reality and [in order to escape] the imaginary: “You do not represent us at all. You do not speak in our name and you . . . represent neither our sentiment[s] nor our thought[s].”

We, we have scrutinized the pages of history and the actual situation. And we have found the Muslim Algerian nation, formed and in existence, as were formed and have existed all the nations of the world. This community has its history full of high deeds. It has its religious and linguistic unity. It has its own

culture, its habits and its customs, good or bad, as [does] each nation.

What is more, this nation, Algerian and Muslim, is not France. It would not know how to be France, even if it wanted to. It is even a nation quite distant from France, by its language, by its customs, by its



*Children in traditional school, 1930*

3. The idea that only the imams are the legitimate voice of the umma extends back to the beginning of Islam and has remained a potent force in Islamic politics.





*Dar el-Hadith Medresa, Tlemcen, Algeria, between 1937 and 1940*

race, and by its religion, and it does not want to integrate. It has a limited, determined *patrie*: The Algerian *patrie*, within its recognized frontiers,<sup>4</sup> and the administration of which is confided in M. the governor General, designated by the French state.

Moreover, this Muslim Algerian *patrie* is a loyal friend to France. Its loyalty is that of the heart and not at all a superficial loyalty. It offers the sincerity of a friend toward a friend and not at all that of a servant for his master. In

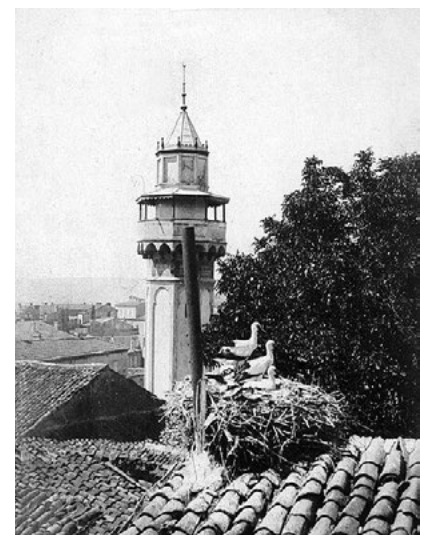
peace and security, it asks France to respect its language and its religion and to smooth the path to progress within the framework of its own religion, its own language, and its own morals. It demands to be gratified with liberty, justice, and equality in order to become a model for progress, equality, and well-being, for the French administration and for Franco-indigenous cooperation. To this end, France could vie with those who brag about their own work in their dominions.

In a situation of global crisis, at a moment when things are growing worse, where the dust has the last word and where Damocles's sword menaces, the Muslim Algerian is awakening, as the lion in his den, to protect the French soil, just as he would defend his Algerian earth, his wife, and his children.<sup>5</sup> In diverse regions, the tens of thousands of tombs of our volunteers (soldiers) stand in testimony [to this].

Also, we, Muslim Algerians who live in our Algerian *patrie*, in the shadow of the tricolored French flag and solidly united with France, in a union that is affected neither [by] small events nor superficial crises, we live with the French as loyal friends.

We respect their government and their laws; we comply with their imperatives and their prohibitions. And we would like them to respect our religion and our language, [we would like them to] protect our dignity and . . . guide us toward a political, social, and economic renaissance. And so we will live together as faithful friends, and if ever the hour arrives to die in defense of the French *patrie* or the Algerian *patrie*, they will find us in the front lines, ready to die side by side, faithful friends.

Upon this basis, things are in their place. We can stand in agreement and this will dissipate all misunderstandings.



*Sidi Lakhdar Mosque Minaret, 1900*

4. The frontiers of Algeria during this period were drawn by the French and included territory that was not historically part of Ottoman Algiers in the west and especially in the south.

5. This is referring to Algerian participation in French military preparation for war with Nazi Germany.

# Image Citations

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