



# *Akademik Eğitim ve Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* (AJESS Journal)

## ***Education in Algeria (1830–1870): Between Arab-Islamic and French Education***

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### **Article History**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines education in Algeria during the first decades of French occupation, from 1830 to 1870. It highlights the flourishing of independent Arab-Islamic education before the occupation. It also considers the role of mosques, zawiyas, and Qur'anic schools in spreading knowledge and preserving Algerian identity. These institutions continued to fulfil their educational role after the French conquest. The article then examines the changes caused by colonial education policy. The French authorities confiscated religious endowments and damaged traditional educational and cultural institutions. Their policy also sought to suppress Arabic language, education, and culture. At the same time, French schools were introduced. A new education system served colonial interests, promoted French, and introduced new curricula. It provided different forms of education for French and other European settlers and for Algerians.

**Keywords:** education; Algeria; French occupation; educational institutions; traditional education; French education.

### **Introduction**

In the earliest days of French occupation, schooling in Algeria almost ceased because security and stability had collapsed. Military operations took priority. The French government sought to subdue an Algerian population that rejected its presence. It therefore made almost no effort to educate Algerians. Before the occupation, Algeria had no unified system of state-run education. Schooling was largely independent and followed long-established traditions. Its main institutions were Qur'anic schools (kuttap), zawiyas, and mosques. These institutions formed the basis of traditional Arabic education and played a central role in Algerian society. They continued to operate after the conquest, despite determined French efforts to eliminate this form of schooling and replace it with an exclusively French system.

Between 1830 and 1870, education in colonial Algeria followed two main paths. The first was Arab-Islamic education, provided by traditional institutions. The second was French education, which introduced new curricula. The new curricula were intended for French and other European settlers on the one hand, and for Algerians on the other.

### **I. Arab-Islamic Education**

Arab-Islamic education was rooted in the Arabic language, Islamic culture, and religious learning. It is also described as traditional education because it continued practices established during the Ottoman period. Its main settings were elementary Qur'anic schools, mosque-based classes, and zawiyas<sup>1</sup>.

#### **1. The State of Arab-Islamic Education at the Beginning of the Occupation**

Historical sources describe the wide reach of education in Algeria under Ottoman rule. They also note the population's interest in learning and its respect for teachers. Elementary instruction was offered in kuttap, zawiyas, and mosques. These institutions helped preserve Algerian identity and combat illiteracy. They operated in both urban and rural areas. Before the French occupation, Algiers, Constantine, Oran, Béjaïa, Tlemcen, and Mazouna were major centres of learning and education<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Abu al-Qasim Saadallah, *A Cultural History of Algeria, 1830–1954*, vol 3, 1st ed (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1998), p 17

<sup>2</sup> Asia Belhassine Rahoui, “The State of Algerian Education Immediately after the French Occupation,” *Journal of Psychological and Educational Studies*, no 7 (2011), p 59

Illiteracy was not widespread in Algerian society before the French occupation in 1830. Qur'anic schools and zawiyas provided education grounded in Arabic and Islam<sup>1</sup>. In 1834, General Valézy described education before the French presence in these terms: "Education in Algeria was in good condition before the French arrived. Almost all Arabs (Algerians) could read and write, since schools existed in most villages and rural communities"<sup>2</sup>.

The educational level reached before the French occupation owed much to zawiyas and individual efforts. Deschi, an official responsible for public education in Algeria, confirmed this when he stated: "Schools in Algeria, in inland towns, and even among the tribes were numerous, well equipped, and rich in manuscripts. In Algiers, every mosque had a school that provided free education. Its teachers received their pay from mosque revenues. Some teachers attracted Arabs from the tribes to their lessons"<sup>3</sup>.

The different stages of traditional Arabic education complemented one another. At the elementary level, children memorised all or part of the Qur'an. They learned to read, write, and understand basic religious principles. At the secondary level, students continued reading and studied Islamic jurisprudence, theology, grammar, morphology, and introductory Qur'anic exegesis. They also studied Hadith and the Prophet's biography. Advanced study covered jurisprudence, the foundations of religion, theology, and Islamic history. It also included elements of arithmetic, astronomy, geography, medicine, and general history. French officials proposed adding arithmetic and geography to primary education. They also suggested history, physics, and chemistry for secondary education, along with the recruitment of teachers from Tunisia and Egypt<sup>4</sup>.

Arab-Islamic education depended heavily on waqf property, or religious endowments. Endowment revenues supported education, teachers, libraries, mosques, and scholarly activity in general. The French authorities understood the importance of this financial base. They therefore confiscated endowments assigned to charitable institutions, places of worship, and education. These endowments had provided essential financial support for schooling<sup>5</sup>. The confiscations were carried out through successive decisions and decrees<sup>6</sup>.

French writings and administrative documents indicate that Arab-Islamic education was generally flourishing in 1830. It comprised three levels: primary, secondary, and higher education. The latter two levels were free. Primary schooling required only a small, voluntary payment, often made in kind. Many schools were attached to mosques. After the occupation, waqf property was absorbed into the French state's holdings. Islamic schools were neglected, and much primary and secondary instruction ceased. Only some remote zawiyas continued to offer advanced lessons. Other schools and zawiyas disappeared because of military occupation, neglect, and the migration or exile of scholars. Among the institutions affected were Salah Bey School in Constantine and the zawiya of Sidi Muhammad ibn Abd al-Rahman in Djurdjura. Algiers once had six such schools: two serving people from the east, three serving those from the west, and one serving residents of the city. By 1846, only one remained. The number of older schools fell sharply, and the instruction in those that survived became limited. Many mosques were demolished or put to other uses. The decline was gradual rather than immediate. Algiers had about 100 schools in 1830. By 1840, only around 24 remained, with about 600 pupils. In 1846, the number fell to 14 schools, attended by between 320 and 400 pupils<sup>7</sup>.

Arab-Islamic education had previously reached towns, villages, and even nomadic encampments. Schools and zawiyas also preserved manuscripts. French military campaigns disrupted gatherings of pupils and scholars. French accounts acknowledge this change. One source attributes the decline of traditional education to war, the confiscation of endowments, and the migration or exile of teachers. Secondary schools were damaged, and teachers left zawiyas located near occupied centres<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. Institutions of Arab-Islamic Education

### 2.1. Education in Qur'anic Schools

Arab-Islamic education survived the dismantling of much of its institutional structure. It was reduced in status, closely monitored, and restricted in both time and content. Nevertheless, it remained largely a matter of private initiative. This continuity reflected Algerians' attachment to the Qur'an, Arabic, and local traditions<sup>9</sup>. Qur'anic schools continued to

<sup>1</sup> Ahmad Tawfiq al-Madani, *This Is Algeria* (Cairo: Egyptian Renaissance Library, 2001)

<sup>2</sup> Charles-Robert Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans et la France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), p 318

<sup>3</sup> Abd al-Hamid Zouzou, *Texts and Documents on the History of Contemporary Algeria, 1830–1900* (Algiers: National Book Institution, 1958), p 206

<sup>4</sup> Saadallah, op cit, pp 23–24

<sup>5</sup> Ahmad Ben Daoud, "Cultural Resistance to French Colonialism in Algeria and Morocco through Education, 1920–1954" (PhD diss, Department of History and Archaeology, University of Oran, 2016–2017), p 35

<sup>6</sup> Claude Collot, *Les institutions de l'Algérie durant la période coloniale, 1830–1962* (Algiers: OPU–ONRS, 1987), p 315

<sup>7</sup> Saadallah, op cit, p 23

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp 25, 28

<sup>9</sup> Mohamed Ben Chouch, "Education in Algeria under French Occupation, 1830–1871" (Master's thesis in Modern and Contemporary History, Department of History, University of Algiers, 2007–2008), p 127

teach children to memorise the Qur'an. Most were attached to a mosque or zawiya and formed part of that institution. A child who memorised the Qur'an could become a student, or talib, and proceed to mosque-based instruction in jurisprudence and other subjects<sup>1</sup>. These schools also prepared learners for further study at al-Zaytuna in Tunis, al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, or, in some cases, mosques in the eastern Arab world. They helped maintain Qur'anic education throughout Algerian society. Their curriculum, however, remained mainly religious and focused on the foundations of reading and writing the Qur'an. European observers, including military officers who arrived in 1830, acknowledged their prevalence<sup>2</sup>.

Many parents preferred Qur'anic education to the Franco-Arab schools. Emir Abdelkader established Qur'anic schools where children learned prayer, the principles of Islam, reading, and writing. Those wishing to continue their studies could attend zawiya or mosques. Qur'anic schools were particularly common in rural areas. Their number was reported to have reached 851, offering instruction in the Qur'an and writing<sup>3</sup>.

## 2.2. Education in Mosques

After completing Qur'anic schooling, children who wished to continue their education attended classes in mosques. These classes covered intermediate and secondary studies. Some lessons reached an advanced level. The French authorities, however, demolished many mosques that had served as centres of learning. They also restricted the activities of scholars and jurists who taught there<sup>4</sup>. The colonial administration viewed Algerian teachers as a threat because they preserved the population's cultural and religious identity. It closed many schools and expelled their teachers, with the aim of making Algerian society illiterate. It also introduced a law restricting travel without official permission. This measure obstructed students seeking knowledge within Algeria or abroad. As one account states: "Under the policy of integration, followed by secularisation, Qur'anic schools were strictly restricted. Zawiya schools were monitored, closed, and harassed. The number of Qur'anic teachers and instructors declined. Knowledge of Arabic then weakened because it was no longer taught"<sup>5</sup>.

During the 1840s, France allowed limited instruction to continue in mosques under close supervision. Courses were largely confined to jurisprudence and basic religious rules for the general population. They were not intended to support extensive scholarly study. Mosque education nevertheless remained active in Constantine, where approximately 700 students were enrolled. About 150 received stipends. The curriculum included Arabic and Islamic studies, grammar, exegesis, memorisation of standard texts, and reading. It also covered introductory jurisprudence, theology, Hadith, astronomy, and arithmetic. Students generally attended for about seven years. The instruction was described as free for pupils and teachers alike<sup>6</sup>.

## 2.3. Education in Zawiya

Zawiyas were especially widespread in rural areas, notably in the Zouaoua region and the south. Their remoteness initially kept them beyond the direct reach of French colonial authorities. French control extended to these areas only in the 1850s. The authorities then monitored teaching programmes and political and social activities. Zawiyas also lost endowment property. The French took over their buildings, converted them to other uses, and demolished many of them<sup>7</sup>.

Zawiyas resembled present-day institutes of religious learning. They taught the Qur'an and its rules of recitation, Islamic jurisprudence, other religious sciences, and Arabic. After reaching a certain level, some students continued their studies at al-Zaytuna in Tunis, al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco, or al-Azhar in Egypt. Many returned to teach at their original zawiya or a mosque in Algeria. These institutions offered several fields of knowledge, with particular emphasis on religious studies<sup>8</sup>.

A survey conducted in 1851 recorded 8,347 students in 593 rural zawiyas. Their courses included jurisprudence, grammar, Islamic history, and literature. Students were expected to have completed elementary education. They had generally memorised the Qur'an and learned to read, write, and perform basic arithmetic. They were also familiar with selected instructional texts<sup>9</sup>. Among the zawiyas that continued to teach despite colonial restrictions were the Zawiya of al-Hamel, the Zawiya of Abu al-Qasim al-Husayni al-Boujlili, and the Zawiya of Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Hami<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Saadallah, op cit, p 39

<sup>2</sup> Abdelkader Hallouche, *French Educational Policy in Algeria*, 1st ed (Algiers: Dar al-Umma, 1999), p 135

<sup>3</sup> Saadallah, op cit, p 46

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p 59

<sup>5</sup> Charles-Robert Ageron, *History of Contemporary Algeria* (Algiers: Office of University Publications, 1982), pp 106–107

<sup>6</sup> Saadallah, op cit, pp 61–62

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp 167–172

<sup>8</sup> Ben Chouch, op cit, p 129

<sup>9</sup> Saadallah, op cit, p 173

<sup>10</sup> Ben Chouch, op cit, pp 128–131

## II. French Education

French education refers here to schooling administered by the French colonial authorities, regardless of the language of instruction<sup>1</sup>. Arabic education was placed under the direct supervision of the Governor-General. Until 1848, it fell within the authority of the French Ministry of War. Schools serving Europeans, by contrast, were administered directly by the French Ministry of Education<sup>2</sup>. French education can therefore be examined in two categories.

### 1. Education for French and Other European Settlers

#### 1.1. Primary Education

This branch of education faced no material, administrative, or financial difficulties. Funds were available from the French state, the colonial government, and municipalities. It was often described as flourishing and closely aligned with the colonial system supported by settlers, known as colons. Its main purpose was to meet the educational needs of the French community<sup>3</sup>.

While the French debated whether to withdraw from Algeria or remain, the colonial authorities began organising public schooling. Primary subjects were to follow the curriculum used in France, with Arabic added. In April 1833, the first official French school in Algeria opened under the name "School of Mutual Instruction." It taught reading, writing, and arithmetic. A similar school opened in Annaba after the city was occupied<sup>4</sup>.

The authorities continued opening primary schools for the French population in Algerian towns with substantial French and European settler communities. By 1838, Oran had four primary schools and Annaba had five. Other primary schools came under the authority of the Catholic bishopric established in 1838. These were religious schools<sup>5</sup>.

#### 1.2. Secondary Education

The French authorities established an institute in 1836. In 1837, it had no more than 80 students. The curriculum included classical Arabic, Latin, French, Greek, geography, history, natural sciences, and mathematics. Enrolment soon fell to 19, reportedly because Latin was difficult. Students ranged in age from seven to nineteen. The institution was not a secondary school in the modern sense. It offered several levels, ending at an intermediate or secondary stage. Its students were French or other Europeans. Algerians were largely excluded. When admitted, they attended separate "native" classes and had to pass entrance examinations. The small number of Algerians who entered French secondary education generally came from families whose heads held political office<sup>6</sup>.

#### 1.3. Higher Education

Higher education developed for the French population, but Algerians had almost no access to it. French citizenship was required for admission to some higher institutes. This requirement kept many Algerians out of university-level study<sup>7</sup>. The colonial authorities were also reluctant to establish a university in Algeria. They feared that a local university might encourage separatist ideas among European settlers. Their concern was not that Algerians would seek separation, since higher education had never been designed primarily for them. Keeping advanced studies and qualifications in France also helped maintain ties between the metropole and its settler population in Algeria<sup>8</sup>.

#### 1.4. Arabic Language Classes and Chairs

At the start of the occupation, French officials considered knowledge of Arabic essential for securing control over Algeria. A debate emerged over whether Algerians should learn French or French officials should learn Arabic. During the first decades, the second view prevailed. Providing education to the Algerian population was not then a priority. The French authorities were focused on overcoming armed resistance. Learning both classical and colloquial Arabic was one of the means they used toward that end<sup>9</sup>.

Even in the late nineteenth century, when French colonial authorities were occupied with suppressing popular uprisings, they continued to establish schools where French learners could study Arabic. The purpose was not to protect Arabic culture. Rather, mastery of Arabic was viewed as a means of resisting its influence and strengthening colonial control over Algerians<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Saadallah, op cit, p 209

<sup>2</sup> Hallouche, op cit, p 36

<sup>3</sup> Saadallah, op cit, p 290

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p 292

<sup>5</sup> Samira Boudiaf, "Teachers and Professors during the Colonial Period," *Journal of Research and Humanities Studies*, no 8 (2014), Constantine

<sup>6</sup> Saadallah, op cit, p 303

<sup>7</sup> al-Madani, op cit, p 144

<sup>8</sup> Saadallah, op cit, p 304

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp 311–312

<sup>10</sup> Yahya Bouaziz, *Colonial Domination Policy and the Algerian National Movement, 1830–1954* (Algiers: Office of University Publications, 2007), p 60

## 2. Education for Algerians

Education intended for Algerians took several forms. These included French urban schools, Franco-Arab schools, and schools specifically designated for the indigenous population. All operated at the primary level<sup>1</sup>. Many Algerian families were reluctant to enrol their children. Some schools attracted only five Algerian pupils. Parents feared that these institutions aimed above all to distance their children from the religion of their families and ancestors<sup>2</sup>.

The colonial administration considered schooling for Algerians for several reasons, including the following<sup>3</sup>:

- Educating Algerians was driven by the need for qualified labour to serve settler interests. The authorities also sought to create a group of Algerians who could mediate between the colonial administration and the local population.
- The French sought to extend military conquest through intellectual influence by using schools. Their aim was to accelerate Algerian submission and integration into the French system.

One of the administration's principal objectives was the Francisation of Algerians. French was treated as the official language, while Arabic was classified as foreign. The authorities sought to make French the language of instruction in all official schools. They hoped to produce a French-speaking segment of Algerian society and replace the population's original language. This would help establish a new culture. Colonial policymakers presented that culture as a path from backwardness to the principles of civilisation they claimed to represent<sup>4</sup>.

The administration did more than impose French in schools and public offices. It also asked notable families and the bourgeoisie to send their children to France. Officials argued that children would obtain a better education at the source of the language. The authorities also regarded this as a sign of goodwill and attachment to the "mother country." Hamdan ibn Uthman Khoja wrote: "General Duvaux convened the municipal council. He said that, for the benefit of the French government, at least 50 sons of notable families should be gathered and sent to France as hostages and to learn the language..."<sup>5</sup>.

Franco-Arab schools were established during the Second French Republic (1848–1852) under a presidential decree dated 14 July 1850. These primary schools taught both Arabic and French. Each had a French headmaster and a Muslim deputy. Children studied the Qur'an, as in indigenous schools, and learned to read and write from books placed under colonial supervision. They also studied arithmetic, history, geography, and drawing. Music groups were formed to learn French patriotic songs, which Algerian children sang daily. Schools for girls offered sewing, reading, and writing. They were also intended to introduce new customs into Algerian family life. The purpose of these schools was therefore more political than educational. One French observer stated: "The purpose of spreading French education among Algerians through the various Franco-Arab schools is to eliminate independent, private Arab-Islamic schools"<sup>6</sup>.

The curriculum of these Franco-Arab schools was as follows<sup>7</sup>:

Pupils studied Arabic, French, arithmetic, weights and measures, and general history and geography. At the end of their studies, those who had attended regularly sat an examination. A committee appointed by the Governor-General conducted the assessment. Its administrative centre was in Oran. Successful candidates received certificates at three levels:

1. Third-class certificate: awarded to Algerian pupils who could speak French proficiently.
2. Second-class certificate: awarded to Algerian pupils who had mastered reading and writing.
3. First-class certificate: awarded to Algerian pupils who could speak and read French and had knowledge of arithmetic, history, and geography.

The initial number of schools was six. By 1861, it had risen to 38, serving approximately 13,000 Algerian children. This period was regarded as a high point in schooling for Algerians. The schools later faced opposition from settlers who rejected the education of the indigenous population. They also faced resistance from the municipalities responsible for them. After municipal authorities assumed control, the schools began to decline. Local funding was limited, and municipalities often refused financial support. Schools consequently closed in Blida, Miliana, and Orléansville<sup>8</sup>.

The French administration also established three Islamic legal schools (madrasas). The colonial authorities had struggled to recruit staff for the judiciary, teaching, and the issuing of religious legal opinions. This shortage followed the decline of Arab-Islamic education. They therefore sought to train personnel for these duties by retaining elements of the existing

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<sup>1</sup> Saadallah, op cit, p 322

<sup>2</sup> Madani Hussein, "Formal Education in Algeria, 1884–1914: The Case of Western Algeria" (Master's thesis, Department of History and Archaeology, University of Oran, 2012–2013), pp 3–4

<sup>3</sup> Ben Daoud, op cit, p 52

<sup>4</sup> Kamal Khalil, "The Three Islamic Legal Schools in Algeria: Origins and Development, 1850–1951" (Master's thesis, Department of History, University of Constantine, 2007–2008), p 33

<sup>5</sup> Hamdan ibn Uthman Khoja, *Al-Mir'ah [The Mirror]*, trans Muhammad al-Arabi al-Zubayri (Algiers: National Printing Arts Institution, 2005), p 222

<sup>6</sup> Khalil, op cit, p 36

<sup>7</sup> Hussein, op cit, p 7

<sup>8</sup> Khalil, op cit, p 36

Arabic curriculum. A decree dated 30 September 1850 provided for the establishment of three schools in Constantine, Tlemcen, and Médéa<sup>1</sup>.

These institutions were also intended to compete with zawiyas and traditional schools in Algeria and neighbouring North African countries. The authorities particularly sought to reduce the number of students travelling to al-Zaytuna in Tunis and al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco. Advanced courses within Algeria were meant to keep those students at home. Governor Randon summarised the purpose of the government schools: "These schools will produce administrative officials and judges. More broadly, they will train influential figures who will not escape our grasp." The administration also hoped to secure the loyalty of newly trained religious scholars. Their support would help implement future colonial policies and sustain control by non-military means<sup>2</sup>. Constantine, Médéa, and Tlemcen were selected because of their influence over surrounding regions. They were centres of the three administrative divisions and had played important roles in Algerian history.

### Conclusion

French occupation began in 1830 without any substantial concern for schooling, especially for Algerians. French generals, intellectuals, and clergy later examined the existing system of Arabic education and its development. The colonial authorities then worked to dismantle that system and establish French education in its place. One branch served French and other European settlers. Another was intended for Algerians and aimed to train a group that would support colonial rule and policy.

The French occupation of Algeria was not only a military conquest. It also brought profound changes to education. By confiscating waqf property and damaging mosques, zawiyas, and Qur'anic schools, colonial policy weakened Arab-Islamic educational institutions. At the same time, it developed schools that served settler interests and promoted French language and culture. Arab-Islamic education did not disappear, however. It survived through Qur'anic schools, mosques, and zawiyas. Education thus became an arena of conflict between a colonial project seeking cultural dominance and an Algerian society determined to preserve its identity and historical foundations.

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Daoud, op cit, p 53

<sup>2</sup> Khalil, op cit, p 71

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