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ARTICLE**French Cultural Policies in Colonial Algeria and the National Reformist Current: An Analytical Study of the Role of the Newspaper al-Basa'ir in the Defense of Algerian Identity (1931–1956)****Abed Mimouna**

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Abstract

From the outset, the colonial administration understood that its endurance depended on severing the symbolic and epistemic ties binding Algerians to their civilizational heritage—a heritage that constituted the principal site of resistance and the foundational reference for collective identity. To achieve this objective, France implemented a bifurcated strategy: first, it systematically dismantled indigenous institutional frameworks by dissolving the waqf system, placing communal places of assembly under direct state oversight, and subjecting vernacular educational networks to rigorous surveillance; second, it launched a comprehensive acculturation campaign—initially coordinated by Cardinal Lavigerie—that strategically exploited recurrent social crises and famines to extend its influence, supported by an extensive infrastructure of mission schools and philanthropic medical facilities. Confronted with this existential encroachment on their cultural integrity, a nationalist-reformist movement coalesced under the Association of Algerian Scholars (AAS), established in 1931. Central to its mandate was the preservation of an Arab-Algerian identity, a goal pursued through multiple channels, most notably the newspaper al-Basā'ir, which emerged as a pivotal intellectual and discursive platform for contesting French cultural penetration.

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Introduction:

Amidst the civilizational clash that characterized the nineteenth century, Algeria emerged as a battleground for an existential confrontation between a Western colonial project imbued with missionary aspirations and a deeply rooted Islamic consciousness woven into the social fabric. French policy in Algeria transcended conventional occupation, evolving into a systematic endeavor to reshape the religious and cultural identity of society, guided by a colonial vision anchored in a distinct civilizational framework.

This confrontation assumed existential dimensions, as mosques transformed from places of worship into arenas of ideological struggle, and schools became bastions of identity preservation rather than mere centers of learning. The French missionary movement constituted not merely transient religious campaigns, but rather a comprehensive project that leveraged all available instruments - from exploiting humanitarian crises to co-opting cultural elites.

Within this complex historical context, we examine the following central question: How did the Islamic reformist discourse, as embodied by the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars and its media organs such as Al-Basa'ir

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newspaper, formulate an effective intellectual and cultural counter-strategy against proselytization policies? More specifically, how did this discourse succeed in safeguarding religious constants when confronting a formidable colonial apparatus wielding overwhelming instruments of power and influence?

1. The Policy of Christianization in Algeria:

France was acutely aware that its continued occupation of Algeria depended on severing the indigenous population's connection to Islam - the spiritual force that unified Algerian society and fueled its resistance. Consequently, colonial authorities systematically targeted Islam through multiple channels: restricting religious practices, promoting Christian missionary work, and suppressing Arabic-Islamic education.

The depth of this anti-Islamic hostility was encapsulated by Bashir al-Ibrahimi's observation: "Colonialism came to Algeria bearing both the sword and the cross - the former to entrench colonial domination, the latter to facilitate Christian proselytization... Had it confined itself to material exploitation, we might have attributed this to typical colonial greed. But this was fundamentally a Christian religious colonialism that confronted Islam from the very first day with Roman Catholic fervor, driven by vindictiveness and animosity." (Muhammad al-Bashir al-Ibrahimi, 1947, p. 01)

This systematic Christianization campaign dates back to the initial French invasion of 1830. Before examining its mechanisms, we must first distinguish between two key concepts: Christianization (forced conversion) and proselytization (voluntary missionary work)

A. The Concept of Christianization (al-Tansīr)

Linguistically, the term *tansīr* stems from the verb *naṣṣara* (with a stressed *ṣād*) and the phrase *nassarahutansīran*, meaning "to Christianize" or "turn someone into a Christian." This aligns with the Prophetic Hadith: "Every child is born upon the innate faith (*fitrah*); it is their parents who Judaize or Christianize (*yunassirānahu*) them." Thus, *tansīr* lexically denotes the act of converting others to Christianity.

In contemporary usage, *tansīr* signifies organized efforts to propagate Christian doctrines globally, employing diverse methodologies to advance this religious agenda.

B. The Concept of Evangelization (al-Tabshīr)

Within Islamic scholarship, *tabshīr*—as defined by missionary discourse—refers to the dissemination of Christian teachings among Muslims. However, modern Christian theology often obscures the original message of Christ, which Islam regards as a divine revelation specific to the Children of Israel and fundamentally distinct from later Pauline doctrines. This discrepancy renders the Muslim stance toward *tabshīr* unambiguous: it is categorically rejected as a theological imposition.

Muslims cautiously engage with the term *tabshīr* only when it entails exposing the discrepancies between missionary claims and Islamic truth. Missionaries strategically adopt appealing terminology from interfaith texts to subtly infiltrate Muslim communities. Uncritical adoption of such language risks enabling hidden evangelizing agendas, which gradually surface in later phases of Christianization efforts.

Thus, Islamic scholarship unequivocally repudiates *tabshīr* as a missionary tool, condemning its semantic manipulation to advance ideologies incompatible with Islamic creed (Muhammad Othman Saleh, 1989, p. 31).

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C. The Crusader Spirit in the French Campaign

The religious fervor played a pivotal role in justifying the French invasion of Algeria in 1830, as French leaders framed the conquest as a sacred mission to "save Christianity" and serve Catholic interests. France saw itself as the protector of the Catholic Church and viewed the occupation of Algeria as a noble service to Christendom, particularly in the Mediterranean region. The religious dimension significantly influenced King Charles X's decision, encouraged by clergy—most notably Bishop Fréneaux, the Minister of Religious Affairs, who had the Vatican's backing.

In fact, French Minister of War Clermont-Tonnerre explicitly stated in his report to the king on October 14, 1827, that the ultimate goal was to "civilize the natives and convert them to Christianity," portraying the campaign as divinely blessed to restore Christian glory in Africa. (Khadija Bektash, 2007, p. 17)

King Charles X further reinforced this narrative by linking the invasion to the revival of Christian heritage in North Africa. He called upon bishops to organize church prayers for victory, describing the campaign as a "resurrection of the legacy of Saint Augustine and Saint Cyprian." French historians, in turn, framed the conquest as a return to "Roman Christian Africa," evoking the image of the Roman general Scipio. (Khadija Bektash, 2007, p. 18)

Leftist newspapers of the time criticized this religious undertone, accusing the French consul of acting under Vatican influence, which welcomed the invasion as a holy endeavor for the benefit of Christianity (Khadija Bektash, 2007, p. 18).

However, this religious zeal was not confined to rhetoric—it manifested in colonial practices after the occupation. Despite the surrender treaty of July 5, 1830, which guaranteed respect for Islam, the French quickly reneged on their commitments. Shortly after the fall of Algiers, a French general led a religious ceremony at the Casbah (Dépêches télégraphiques, 06 -07- 1830) , where he declared before the army and clergy: "You have reopened with us the gates of Christianity in Africa, and soon we shall restore the civilization that faded here long ago." (Khadija Bektash, 2007, p. 20)

Initially, Algerians believed the French occupation would be temporary and respectful of their religious and cultural identity. Yet the colonial administration soon revealed its true intentions, violating the treaty's terms and gradually spreading missionary campaigns aimed at altering Algerian society's religious and cultural fabric. (Hamdan Ben Othman Khoja ed: Mohamed Larbi Zubairi, 2006, p. 272)

The French authorities seized mosques, repurposing some as military barracks, others as hospitals and churches, while endowments (waqf) dedicated to Mecca and Medina were placed under direct French control (domaine). (Abdeljalil Tamimi, 1972, p. 135) As noted by Hamdan Khodja, "They are Christians, incapable of genuine reconciliation or forgetting their religious hatred. Given the chance, they would attack not only the living but also the dead, desecrating their graves" (Hamdan Ben Othman Khoja ed: Mohamed Larbi Zubairi, 2006)

France systematically employed Christian evangelization as a tool to erase Islamic identity. Missionary activities, conducted under military protection, sought to dismantle Algeria's religious and cultural foundations. This was

not merely a military strategy but an ambitious cultural project to sever Algerians from their Islamic faith and Arabic language. Thus, the occupation evolved from a military conquest into a comprehensive assault on the nation's core identity—proving that the Crusader spirit remained the driving force behind many French colonial practices in Algeria (Hamdan Ben Othman Khoja ed: Mohamed Larbi Zubairi, 2006, p. 267).

D. Methods of Christian Proselytization in Algeria

The means of evangelization in Algeria manifested through diverse approaches, broadly categorized into peaceful and coercive methods, with particular focus on vulnerable populations and impoverished regions.

1. Peaceful Approaches

These methods centered on endearing Jesus Christ to the populace through educational initiatives, hospital foundations, shelter establishments, and humanitarian services (Khadija Bektash, 2007, p. 31). Cardinal Lavigerie explicitly instructed his missionaries to concentrate their efforts on the disadvantaged - particularly orphans and the impoverished - maintaining that charitable works such as constructing schools and shelters, coupled with material assistance, constituted the most effective means to gain Algerians' trust and gradually convert them. He posited that assisting young converts in marriage arrangements and securing their livelihoods would ensure church allegiance and perpetuate Christianity across generations. This "conversion through charity" principle formed an integral component of France's colonial strategy to efface Islamic identity. (Abdelraouf Garnab, p. 87)

From the occupation's inception, Bishop Dupuch, the inaugural bishop of Algiers, undertook the mission of "returning Algerian Muslims to their ancestors' Christian faith" through social services and making the religion appealing. He asserted: "Our mission among the natives...must acquaint them with their forefathers' original religion through benevolent works." Dupuch exploited public destitution by distributing bread and offering monetary incentives for baptism acceptance. (Saadi Meziane, 2010, p. 107)

A particularly notable endeavor involved gathering and rearing homeless village children - a practice endorsed by Pope Gregory XVI and maintained as part of their societal service strategy. The White Fathers (Pères Blancs), a missionary society established by Lavigerie in Algeria (1868), focused their evangelical and social activities on charitable works as a means to cultivate public trust, including orphan care and medical/educational assistance. Initially, they deliberately avoided overt Christian propaganda to circumvent religious sensitivities (Abdelraouf Garnab, p. 87)

These missionary efforts operated within a fraught colonial context, producing divergent perceptions among Algerians. While some viewed the charitable services as a means of escaping poverty, others recognized them as instruments for eroding Islamic identity. Indeed, missionaries succeeded in converting segments of the population, often through material incentives or promises of educational advancement.

The proselytization campaigns permeated both missionary and government-run schools, systematically targeting Algerian children with teachings that contradicted their families' Islamic traditions. This strategy deliberately undermined familial and cultural cohesion. Missionary activity was not confined to northern urban centers but expanded into southern Algeria, establishing proselytization hubs in cities such as Mascara, El Bayadh, Laghouat, Biskra, and even remote settlements like Métlili—wherever human presence could be found.

Among the most prominent figures in this movement was Charles de Foucauld, who settled in the Hoggar region in 1905 after extensive travels across the Algerian Sahara. Although some hagiographic accounts portray him as a spiritual figure seeking cross-cultural understanding, his role within France's colonial framework remains deeply contested. To many Algerians, he epitomized the colonial project's efforts to suppress Islamic identity—a perception that continues to shape his contested legacy in Algerian historical memory (Khalifi, 2004, p. 16).

2- Non-Peaceful Christianization Methods:

During its occupation of Algeria (1830–1962), France implemented a systematic policy to dismantle the Islamic structure of the country, employing various tools to achieve this goal. The colonial administration relied on two parallel approaches: The first involved direct control over Islamic institutions by appointing loyal imams, subjugating Sharia courts, abolishing the waqf (endowment) system, and forcing preachers to mention the French king in Friday sermons. The second was an aggressive Christianization policy that included confiscating manuscripts, converting mosques, and exploiting crises—such as the famine of 1867—to convert

orphans.(Khadija Bektash, 2007, p. 31)

The process of hollowing out Islam's substance took both institutional and practical forms. On one hand, France transformed mosques into government-run institutions managed by its own officials and eliminated the financial independence of religious institutions by seizing waqf assets. On the other hand, it sought to drain the intellectual foundations of Islam by shutting down Quranic schools and zawiyas (Sufi lodges), monitoring religious publications, and restricting the teaching of Islamic jurisprudence to a limited framework. It also imposed strict controls on Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages and converted some historic mosques into churches or museums.(Aboukacem Saadallah, p. 347)

As a result of direct control over Islamic religious affairs, France appointed religious officials to oversee prayers and funeral rites, while endorsing the actions of the colonial administration. French leaders insisted that these measures were meant to "preserve the Muhammadan religion" in accordance with the July 1830 Convention, confining Islam solely to individual acts of worship.(Aboukacem Saadallah, p. 347)

The colonial authorities implemented a deliberate policy in appointing religious figures, selecting only weak individuals who posed no threat to their authority and who demonstrated complete subservience. Over time, the generation of independent Islamic scholars disappeared, replaced by a new generation educated in French-controlled religious schools where instruction was highly directed and limited in scope - particularly within the context of general cultural decline and governmental neglect of education that afflicted the country (Aboukacem Saadallah, p. 347).

In an article published in The Muslim World journal in 1910 (believed to be written by French journalist [name]), the author exposes the reality of French policy in Algeria, stating: "France has fabricated its own version of Islam in Algeria, just as it has tailored religious clerics to its own specifications. This artificial construct was achieved through the systematic suppression of traditional Islamic institutions."

The author continues with a scathing analysis: "Since France entered the Islamic world through the gateway of Algeria, it has taken eight decades to create a unique model of Islam: an Islam without religious endowments (awqaf), with government-administered mosques, clergy functioning as civil servants, and pilgrimage permitted only with official authorization."

With remarkable boldness, the writer critiques French attempts to create hybrid legislation: "Here we are now drafting a distorted law - a forced marriage between Islamic jurisprudence and French legislation. Were we to analyze French military campaigns over the past half-century, we would find at least half were directed against Islamic institutions."

The author concludes with a penetrating diagnosis of the situation: "We have passed the point of no return. The damage is done, and Algeria will never be the same again." This extraordinary testimony, articulated in French, lays bare the colonial practices that sought to distort Algerian Islam and transform it into a pliable instrument of colonial control(Aboukacem Saadallah, p. 349).

The French Christianization policy in Algeria constituted an organic extension of the broader colonial project, operating in concert with the systematic hollowing out of Islam's civilizational substance. While the colonial administration undermined the material foundations of Islam through the confiscation of waqf properties and the conversion of mosques into government institutions, missionaries under Cardinal Lavignerie's leadership moved to exploit the resulting spiritual vacuum.(Ahmed Khatib, 1985, p. 55)

This policy reached its zenith following the devastating famine of 1867, which missionaries strategically exploited to advance their agenda. As the Algerian people endured the ravages of hunger and displacement, missionaries advanced under the banner of disingenuous humanitarianism, employing ostensibly peaceful conversion methods. The synergy between the colonial regime's hard power and the missionaries' soft power revealed France's comprehensive vision to fundamentally reshape Algerian identity - a vision explicitly articulated in the French admission of creating an artificial "French Islam" devoid of its authentic civilizational essence.

Since its establishment in 1931, the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars adopted a long-term national strategy focused on building the Algerian personality within the framework of Arabism and Islam. To achieve this, the Association employed various means, including journalism, as exemplified by its newspaper Al-Basa'ir, which championed the principles of Arabism and Islam.

The Association pursued a comprehensive approach to religious reform, centered on promoting a correct understanding of Islam through lessons, sermons, and publications such as Al-Basa'ir. Its efforts emphasized rectifying religious beliefs and combating superstitions and heretical innovations. Additionally, the Association prioritized the establishment of educational institutions to disseminate Islamic knowledge and the Arabic language while advocating a moderate discourse that promoted justice, fairness, and the rejection of extremism.

In confronting French colonial policies aimed at distorting Islam, the Association adopted peaceful resistance methods while preserving the religious and national unity of Algerian society. This balanced methodology—combining intellectual reform and institutional work—enabled the Association to achieve widespread influence and play a profound role in safeguarding Algeria's Islamic identity (Ahmed Khatib, 1985, p. 55)

3- The role of the reformist discourse of the Ulema Society in revitalizing the Islamic identity:

Since its establishment in 1931, the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema has developed a long-term national strategy, focusing on building the Algerian personality within the framework of Arabism and Islam. In this regard, it relied on several means, including the press, the mouthpiece of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars in its name, and we find among these newspapers the newspaper Al-Basir, whose slogan was Arabism and Islam. (Al-Baseer, Issue 01, 27 -12- 1935)

The Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars adopted an integrated approach in religious reform, represented in spreading the correct awareness of Islam through lessons, sermons and publications such as the newspaper Al-Basir, with an emphasis on correcting doctrines and fighting heresies and superstitions.

It also focused on building educational institutions to spread sharia knowledge and the Arabic language, while adopting a moderate discourse that calls for justice and fairness and rejects intolerance. The Society confronted French colonial policies aimed at distorting Islam through peaceful means, while preserving the cohesion of Algerian society and its religious and national unity. This balanced approach between intellectual reform and institutional work enabled the organization to achieve wide spread and deep influence in preserving Algeria's Islamic identity (Al-Baseer, Issue 01, 27 -12- 1935).

2-The Newspaper Al-Basa'ir: The Voice of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars:

Issued in 1935, Al-Basa'ir served as the official mouthpiece of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars, functioning as a reformist and nationalist platform that embodied the Association's vision in defending Algeria's Islamic and Arab identity. Under the supervision of a group of prominent reformers, most notably Sheikh Al-Bashir Al-Ibrahimi, the newspaper adopted a clear editorial stance that combined religious reform with cultural resistance. Published by Dar Al-Baath for Printing and Publishing in Constantine, Al-Basa'ir carried the torch of awareness and reform under the Quranic verse: "There has come to you enlightenment from your Lord. So whoever sees, it is for [the benefit of] his soul." (Quran, Al-An'am: 104). (Al-Baseer, Issue 02, 10 -01- 1936)

The newspaper focused on combating French colonialism and its policy of Francisation, promoting correct religious awareness, and defending the Arabic language and Islamic education. Despite being banned in 1939 and later resuming publication between 1947 and 1956, Al-Basa'ir continued to fulfill its role through reformist discourse, contributing significantly to the preservation of Algeria's national identity (Al-Baseer, Issue 02, 10 -01- 1936).

4-The Strategy of Al-Basa'ir Newspaper in Confronting French Proselytization Policies:

French colonial proselytization in Algeria posed an existential threat to Islamic and Arab identity, prompting the national elite to counter it through intellectual and educational means. From a media perspective, Al-Basa'ir newspaper played a pivotal role in exposing the dangers of Christian missionary efforts. Its articles consistently warned Algerian society against French missionary schools, which sought to erase Islamic identity, while simultaneously promoting religious and linguistic awareness by advocating for Arabic and Quranic education as an alternative to colonial curricula. Additionally, the newspaper unveiled French policies aimed at converting Algerians through Catholic associations and urged the public to resist them with awareness and determination.

A notable example of the Association's efforts through Al-Basa'ir was its advocacy for the establishment of an orphanage in the Constantine Province as a national alternative project. This initiative aimed to educate youth in

Arabic and Islamic sciences, preventing their enrollment in missionary schools. The seriousness of this project was evident in the allocation of a dedicated budget, reflecting the Algerian elite's commitment to building an independent educational infrastructure to rival French institutions. The project was further distinguished by the supervision of prominent national figures, such as Dr. Ben Djelloul, demonstrating coordinated efforts among the elite to rescue youth from the clutches of proselytization and reinforce an anti-colonial national identity (Al-Bassaer, Issue 04, 24 -01- 1936).

Al-Basa'ir also played a central role in countering French missionary campaigns through a comprehensive reformist discourse. Following a lecture by Sheikh Mubarak Al-Mili titled "Shirk and Its Manifestations," which exposed alarming similarities between certain Islamic and Christian practices—such as the use of prayer beads (misbaha) and their Christian counterparts—the newspaper swiftly disseminated this critical perspective. By doing so, Al-Basa'ir reinforced religious vigilance and intellectual resistance against colonial attempts to distort Islamic beliefs.

Intellectually, it worked to dismantle the ideological foundations of missionary work by publishing in-depth analyses that exposed attempts to erase Islamic identity under the guise of interfaith dialogue. Educationally, it focused on distinguishing between authentic and foreign religious practices, advocating adherence to the pure Quranic methodology. Socially, it successfully transformed the issue of evangelization from an individual concern into a collective cause, mobilizing public opinion against missionary schools while encouraging the enrollment of students in national Islamic schools.

This integrated approach was not merely a reaction but a comprehensive national project that contributed to fortifying Algerian identity. The battle shifted from direct confrontation to building societal awareness that rejected attempts at cultural infiltration, thereby diminishing the influence of missionary organizations and strengthening national education (Al-Bassaer, Issue 04, 24 -01- 1936).

Through its targeted articles, Al-Basa'ir exposed the deceptive methods employed by French missionaries in Algeria, revealing how they exploited the poverty of families to coerce them into sending their children to missionary schools. The newspaper also highlighted the stark contradiction between these schools' claims of providing free services and their actual demands for fees from parents—while Islamic schools struggled with limited resources despite offering free or nearly free education (Al-Bassaer, Issue 06, 06 -02- 1936).

The newspaper emphasized the promotion of Islamic education as a national alternative, showcasing the success of reformist schools in attracting over two hundred male and female students despite financial challenges. These schools served as a stronghold for preserving Arab-Islamic identity by focusing on teaching the Quran and the Arabic language, countering French curricula that sought to entrench Christian culture.

The Association of Muslim Scholars (Jam'iyyat al-Ulama al-Muslimin) did not hesitate, through its newspaper Al-Basa'ir, to publicly condemn families that collaborated with missionaries despite being aware of their true agenda. The newspaper exposed how the poor were exploited through false promises of financial and educational assistance, which were, in reality, tools to strip children of their religion and identity. It also documented numerous cases in cities like Oran, where children were converted under the guise of education.

Moreover, Al-Basa'ir called for broad societal solidarity, urging the wealthy and local municipalities to financially support Islamic schools, enabling them to withstand missionary enticements. It warned that societal negligence in this regard would leave the door wide open for the triumph of evangelization, particularly given the material superiority of missionary schools.

From this, we can conclude that the Association, through Al-Basa'ir, adopted a meticulous, evidence-based approach to expose missionary violations while emphasizing legal resistance to such practices. It encouraged parents to adhere to Islamic education and report any conversion attempts, contributing to the mobilization of public opinion against this phenomenon (Al-Bassaer, Issue 06, 06 -02- 1936).

In conclusion, it can be argued that the newspaper pursued an integrated strategy combining exposure, awareness-raising, and institution-building. It worked to uncover missionary abuses, promote Islamic educational alternatives, and rally community efforts—forming a formidable barrier against attempts to erase Islamic identity in Algeria. Through these comprehensive strategies, Al-Basa'ir succeeded in establishing an intellectual and educational line of defense that helped preserve Algerian identity and thwart colonial evangelization schemes (Al-Bassir, Issue 02, 10 -02- 1936).

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Conclusion:

French policy in Algeria adopted a systematic missionary character, aiming to erase Islamic identity through multiple instruments—from seizing control of religious institutions and confiscating endowments (*awqaf*) to exploiting humanitarian crises to propagate Christianity. This policy combined hard power (shutting down Sufi lodges [*zawaya*] and repurposing mosques) with soft power (missionary schools and dispensaries), capitalizing on the efforts of Cardinal Lavigerie, who transformed the 1867 famine into an opportunity to advance evangelization.

In contrast, the Association of Muslim Scholars (*Jam'iyyat al-'Ulama al-Muslimin*) and its newspaper *Al-Basa'ir* emerged as the primary defenders of Islamic identity through a reformist discourse centered on Arabic education, combating religious innovations (*bid'ah*), and raising public awareness about the dangers of missionary activities. Despite the ferocity of French policies, this reformist resistance preserved the core of Algerian identity and laid the groundwork for the 1954 Liberation Revolution. This underscores the ultimate failure of the colonial project to uproot Islam from the collective consciousness of the Algerian people.

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