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French Orientalism in Algeria Between Fairness and Unfairness

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Abstract

We discuss in this paper, entitled French Orientalism in Algeria Between Fairness and Unfairness, the phenomenon of Orientalism—its concept, origins, goals, and effects—on the basis that Orientalism was one of the aspects of colonialism in Algerian society, aiming at the eradication of our identity, language, religion, culture, and all established foundations. Yet we note that Orientalism had both a positive side, which served Islamic civilization, and a negative side, which harmed our nation. Here we chose to address both the moderate Orientalists who did justice to what the Algerian man contributed, and the extremist fanatical Orientalists who sought to obliterate Algerian identity and its components from global existence.

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Introduction

The struggle between Islam and the West is deeply rooted in the history of human thought. Islam endured immense hardships against foreign attacks. The previous wars and battles during the Islamic conquests, and the victories achieved over tyrants, oppressors, and atheists alike, were driven by foreign ambitions to exploit the wealth of Arab-Islamic societies and, above all, to strike at religion.

What the Crusades failed to achieve in Christianizing the world through military force, new methods were devised for controlling the Islamic world. Among these new civilizational methods was Orientalism, which evolved as a colonial approach through studying the cultural heritage of Muslims in all areas of life. This was meant to make domination easier and to eradicate Arab-Islamic civilization from global cultural existence, while sowing doubt in the hearts of all Muslims.

To address the subject thoroughly, we divided our study into two sections. The first discusses Orientalism in terms of its concept, origins, motives, and methods. The second examines Orientalism between those who were fair to Arab-Islamic civilization and those who were unjust. Within this framework, we raise the following questions:

- What is the linguistic and terminological meaning of Orientalism?
- When did Orientalism emerge?
- What are its motives and methods?
- Is Orientalism to be read only positively, or is there also a negative reading?
- Is Orientalism fairness or unfairness toward Arab Muslims?

First: Orientalism—its concept, origins, motives, and methods

A. Linguistically:

The word *Istishrāq* (Orientalism) is formed on the pattern *Istīfāl*. It is derived from the word *Sharq* (East), with the addition of the letters alif, sīm, and tā'. Its meaning is "seeking the East," which refers to seeking the sciences, literature, languages, and religions of the East.

In *Al-Mu'jam al-Wasīṭ*, it is said: *Sharqat al-shams sharqan, shurūqan*—"the sun rose." In *Lisān al-'Arab* by Ibn Manẓūr we find: the word *Istishrāq* comes from the triliteral root *sh-r-q*; *ashraqat al-ard* means "the earth lit up with the shining of the sun." The Orientalist is thus the one who delves deeply into the languages and literature of the East.

Westerners also considered "the East" a political problem posed by European powers after the 13th century, aimed at putting an end to the Islamic conquests in the East.

B. Terminologically:

The concept of Orientalism is not singular; it varies between objective and subjective interpretations, depending on each specialist researcher. In this study, we found Edward Said defining it as:

"Orientalism is a style of discourse, of thinking and speaking, supported by institutions, vocabularies, scientific research, images, intellectual schools, even colonial bureaucracy, and colonial methods."

This definition suggests that Orientalism is a method of domination and control over underdeveloped nations and oppressed peoples.

Ali ibn Ibrahim al-Namlah defined it as:

"Orientalism is the occupation with Muslim sciences by those outside of Islam, regardless of the geographical or religious and cultural stance of the scholar."

‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ḥanbakah al-Maydanī defined it as:

"A term used by Westerners for studies concerning Eastern peoples, their history, religions, languages, social conditions, lands, and everything related to them. Its primary purpose was Christian missionary work, as well as serving Western colonial aims in Muslim lands, and preparing studies necessary to fight Islam and destroy the Islamic nation."

Muḥammad Yāsīn ‘Uraybī defined it as:

"Orientalism is a means of transferring the movement of understanding and action from East to West, a movement that appeared through European colonizers, particularly in al-Andalus, through translations, commentaries, interpretations, syntheses, and adaptations."

Thus, Orientalism reflects the European Western tendency to study Islamic Eastern civilization across all fields, whether driven by intellectual curiosity or by hostile ideological motives.

Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṣaghīr added:

"It is the study by Westerners of the heritage of the East, especially concerning its history, languages, literature, arts, sciences, traditions, and customs."

From all this, we realize that Orientalism is a Western approach to the Islamic East with multiple aims and objectives. In my view, it is a method of domination and control over the Islamic East and an attempt to destroy it—more devastating than past wars of arms.

2. Origins

It is difficult to determine the exact beginnings of Orientalism. Some studies show that it began with the arrival of Western monks in al-Andalus during its glory, where they learned its sciences, literature, and arts, and studied under Muslim scholars in various fields, especially philosophy, medicine, and mathematics.

Other researchers trace it back to the Crusades, which lasted nearly two centuries. The Christian Church harbored ambitions and deep-seated resentment against Islam and Arab civilization. Thus, the West first encountered Arab-Islamic heritage in the context of the Crusades.

Still others date its emergence to the 18th century, taking Napoleon's campaign on Egypt as a starting point. Orientalism then passed through two stages:

- The first, from the 18th century to the early European Renaissance, characterized by direct contact between Muslims and the West.
- The second, from the beginning of the European Renaissance to the present century, where the influence of Islamic thought became evident in Western thought, particularly among its writers.

Hence, determining the exact beginnings of Orientalism is not easy. Despite differing scholarly views, the ultimate aim was one: to study Arab-Islamic civilization in order to dominate it, undermine its religion, identity, language, customs, and all aspects of its heritage.

3. Motives

Orientalism did not arise from nothing; it had several motives:

1. Religious motive:

The main motive was religious. The failure of the Crusades left Western hostility against Islam smoldering beneath the surface. One Orientalist even declared:

"A new enemy has arisen in the East: Islam, founded on force and based on the harshest form of fanaticism. Muhammad placed the sword in the hands of his followers and permitted them moral laxity and plunder. Yet Christianity, with the sword of Charles Martel, blocked Islam at Poitiers in 732 CE."

Thus, what the Crusades failed to achieve militarily, they sought to complete through Orientalism, with the ultimate aim of eradicating Islam at its roots.

Their goal was missionary: to Christianize the world. They sought to distort Islam's image, weaken Muslim faith, and sow doubt in Islamic heritage.

2. Political and colonial motive:

Orientalism and colonialism had a master-slave relationship. Colonial control was not accidental but intentional. Edward Said wrote:

"If we take the late 18th century as a starting point, Orientalism can be analyzed as the institutional framework for dealing with the East—producing reports, judgments, and knowledge of it. In short, Orientalism was a Western style for dominating the East."

Mustafa al-Siba'i noted:

"Once they achieved military and political control, they encouraged Orientalist studies to weaken our spiritual and moral resistance, casting doubt on our heritage, our creed, and our values, so that we lose confidence in ourselves and fall into the arms of the West."

Thus, Orientalism served colonialism by studying every detail of Islamic civilization to dominate it.

3. Scientific motive:

Some Orientalists were driven by intellectual curiosity, seeking to learn from Islamic civilization objectively. Yet they were very few. Most sought to undermine Islam. Still, Western civilization undeniably built on much of what it acquired from Islamic heritage.

4. Economic motive:

Economics was another motive. Control over resources and markets was crucial. Orientalists facilitated Western economic dominance by making Muslim societies into consumers rather than producers. Mustafa al-Siba'i and others pointed out that Orientalists helped ensure Muslims became dependent on Western goods, undermining local industries.

5. Methods

To succeed, Orientalists employed multiple methods, such as:

- Writing books, encyclopedias, and dictionaries, and establishing libraries.
- Holding conferences and publishing critical editions of manuscripts.
- Missionary work under the guise of humanitarian activities such as schools, hospitals, and associations.

All these served as tools for colonial control.

Second: French Orientalism Between the Fairness of the Just and the Injustice of the Unfair

From what we have explained, Orientalism was an aspect of colonial domination aimed at erasing Islamic civilization. Yet some Orientalists were fair, motivated by love of knowledge and objectivity, while others were unjust, driven by prejudice.

1. Examples of Fair Orientalists

a. Régis Blachère

Born in Paris in 1900, studied in Morocco and Algeria, later became a professor. He authored works such as *History of Arabic Literature*, a French translation of the Qur'an, and *Elements of Arabic Language*.

Blachère loved Arabic deeply, describing it as the language of glory and hidden beauty. He studied its origins from Aramaic and Nabataean scripts and emphasized that without mastering Arabic, one could not understand Arab-Islamic heritage.

He also admired the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), writing *The Question of Muhammad* based largely on Islamic sources. Scholars such as Maxime Rodinson acknowledged Blachère's fairness and objectivity.

b. Gustave Le Bon

Born in 1841, he studied medicine, anthropology, psychology, history, and sociology. He authored *The Civilization of the Arabs* (1884), *The Psychology of Crowds*, and many other works.

In *The Civilization of the Arabs*, he praised Arab contributions to humanity, acknowledging their role in preserving and transmitting ancient sciences to Europe. He defended Islam as a rational, tolerant religion and highlighted its unique respect for women.

2. Examples of Unfair Orientalists

a. Louis Massignon

Born in Paris in 1883, Massignon was a French Orientalist known for his deep insights and numerous studies. He obtained his doctorate with a dissertation on al-Hallāj in 1922 and produced many works, including *The Catholic Church and Islam* and studies on Shi'ism.

Unlike Blachère and Le Bon, however, Massignon exemplified the Orientalist who, despite scholarship, reinforced biased views and contributed to distorting aspects of Islamic heritage in line with colonial interests.

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He also obtained a diploma in Arabic from the National School of Oriental Languages, earned his doctorate with a dissertation on al-Hallāj at the Sorbonne in 1922, and died in 1962. He authored many works, articles, and participated in various conferences, including:

- The Catholic Church and Islam
- Research on the Extreme Shiites in Baghdad at the End of the Third Century A.H.
- Folklore among Fearful Muslims
- Christ in the Gospel According to al-Ghazālī
- Four Texts Related to al-Hallāj

2-1-2 Massignon and Sufism:

When we speak of the French orientalist Louis Massignon, we are speaking of Islamic mysticism, and specifically of al-Hallāj. He admired al-Hallāj's approach to Sufi religiosity, and thus earned his doctorate with a dissertation entitled *The Passion of al-Hallāj, the Martyr of Islamic Mysticism*, in which he showed that Sufism is the first drop of religiosity in the diverse beliefs of humanity... This Sufi truth is the drop of faith in the human heart, with its constant yearning and ongoing striving to achieve connection between oneself and the sacred. He attempted to establish comparisons between Christianity and Islam, clarifying that Sufism in Islam corresponds to monasticism in Christianity.

However, some viewed him as a servant of French colonialism in essence, contrary to his appearance. We find, for example, Muḥammad Kurd 'Alī stating that it is incumbent upon every Arab and every Muslim to doubt most of the judgments issued by the French on Islam and Muslims, since there are among the French those who view everything only through the lens of colonialism. As found in the book entitled *Orientalism and the Orientalists: Their Merits and Demerits*, Massignon is considered an adviser on French colonial affairs in North Africa and the spiritual patron of French missionary societies in Egypt. From this, we realize that he was an agent of France, aiming to serve and further fuel French colonialism.

2-1-3 Massignon and Islam:

From what we have studied of Massignon's interest in Islam, he viewed it as a monotheistic creed with Judeo-Christian roots, deriving from the monotheism of our master Abraham, peace be upon him. By this, he sought to establish a Christianized form of Islam. This is evident in his statement: *"The history of the Arab race begins with the tears of Hagar—the first tears in the Holy Scriptures."* No matter how much he served Islam, there remained hidden intentions to serve Christianity more than Islam.

He further explained that the idea of divine union, which the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) rejected, was realized mystically with al-Hallāj. Yet such a view is considered by Ahl al-Sunnah and Muslims in general as unacceptable mystical aberrations. Massignon believed that pursuing research on these shared stages between the two religions could prepare a favorable ground for fruitful theological dialogue between Christianity and Islam. He deeply studied Islam and acknowledged the prophethood of Muḥammad, the Messenger of God, recognizing as just the use of the sword against those who did not acknowledge God's right over humankind. He defended Islam with all his strength against some orientalists hostile to it.

2-2 The Clutches of the Unjust Orientalist "Louis Jacques Bercher (Bernier):"

2-2-1 Biographical and Academic Profile:

Louis Jacques Bercher (Bernier) was a French orientalist born in Montargis in 1819. He was fond of and eager for knowledge, studying under the French orientalist Silvestre de Sacy and others. He later held the Chair of Arabic in Algeria, where his mission was to teach European military and civilian personnel the Algerian vernacular.

Among his works and writings are:

- *Arabic Education in Algeria* (1846)
- *Theoretical and Practical Book for Teaching Arabic* (1846)
- *Literary Selections in Arabic and the Vernacular* (1846)
- *Al-Ajurrūmiyya in Arabic Grammar*
- *Rules of Reading, Writing, and Speaking Arabic* (1857)

2-2-2 Bercher (Bernier) and the Project of Language Teaching:

When we mention the French orientalist Louis Bercher (Bernier), we mention the Arabic language, for he devoted great attention to it, believing that understanding any society could only be achieved through its language. To build close relations with the locals, he said: *“...they will grow accustomed to considering us not as conquerors...but as protectors of their interests and civilizers of their lands, and by studying their literature, through which we may reach the sources of their ideas, their prejudices, and their customs...”*

Here we understand that Bercher’s (Bernier’s) intentions were not benevolent but malicious, aimed at uncovering their secrets and facilitating the eradication of the Arabic language from Algerian existence, ultimately replacing it with French. As clarified by the contemporary Algerian historian Abū al-Qāsim Sa’d Allāh in his book *The Cultural History of Algeria*, Bercher (Bernier) played a major role in promoting Arabic among Europeans, at the behest of the French colonizer, since such linguistic work served the goals of the colonial administration.

2-2-3 Bercher (Bernier) and His Impact on Algerian Social and Cultural Life:

Bercher’s (Bernier’s) influence on Algerian society during French occupation was significant, and may be summarized as follows:

- Casting doubt on the identity of the Algerian people through cultural dualism
- Promoting vernacular dialects to undermine unity and sow discord
- Spreading ignorance and illiteracy in Algerian society to an unprecedented extent
- Loss of many sources and manuscripts
- Encouraging superstitions and innovations

When we look at the reality of Algerians, we find the role of French more dominant than that of Arabic. This is a bitter truth that must be acknowledged. Researcher Našīra al-Zaytūnī, in her article *The Reality of the Arabic Language in Algeria*, explains that a linguistic conflict is drawn among three forces: Classical Arabic, vernacular dialects, and French. Although Algeria gained independence from France, it has not managed to achieve independence from it linguistically and culturally. French use surpasses that of Classical Arabic due to social and cultural factors, as speaking French has come to be associated with modernity and progress in the Algerian mindset. This is a result of orientalist influence.

This is the bitter reality we live today as a consequence of what France left in our culture. As long as we care more for French than Arabic, this is an affront to our mother tongue—a truth that must be admitted.

Conclusion:

In the end, we say with full clarity and honesty that French orientalism in Algeria, between fairness and unfairness, may be summed up in the following results:

- We found that orientalism, despite its diverse definitions, is universally agreed upon as a Western European orientation in studying Arab-Islamic civilization in all spheres of life without exception.
- We concluded that scholars disagreed on the exact era of orientalism’s origin, yet in my view it began with the West’s conflict with Islam in ancient times.
- The motives and causes for the rise of orientalism were multiple—religious, economic, scientific, commercial, political, and artistic. Yet, according to researchers and thinkers, the religious motive was the primary and fundamental one.
- The diverse methods and forms of orientalism aimed at control and domination over Arab-Islamic civilization.

- Recognizing the reality of orientalism as being between fairness and unfairness: some orientalists were fair to Arabs and Muslims, while others wronged them and failed to acknowledge their contributions to human civilization.
- Among the fair orientalists, we found Régis Blachère and Gustave Le Bon, who strove with good intent to serve Arab-Islamic civilization—an acknowledgment shared by many scholars.
- Among the unfair orientalists, we found Louis Massignon and Louis Jacques Bercher (Bernier), who exerted all their efforts in service of French colonialism, seeking to understand every detail about Arabs and Muslims in various fields, thereby exercising absolute control over our authentic heritage and erasing us from the dictionary of universal human civilization.

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