

The Religious Question in the Discourse of Al-Manar Newspaper and Its National Dimensions in Algeria: A Study of Its Position on the Separation of Islam from the French State and Its Attention to Religious Occasions (1951–1954)

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Abstract:

This study examines the religious question in the discourse of the Algerian newspaper Al-Manar during the period from 1951 to 1954 by analysing its position on the separation of Islam from the French state and its attention to religious seasons and occasions, particularly the Mawlid al-Nabawi (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday). It seeks to uncover the national dimensions underlying this discourse. The study demonstrates that Al-Manar did not treat religion as a purely spiritual domain; rather, it linked the freedom to practise religious rites to the independence of religious institutions. The newspaper's treatment of the separation of Islam from the French administration also reveals the political nature of the religious question, as clearly illustrated by the articles discussing what became known as the "Case with No Judge." As for the newspaper's interest in the Mawlid al-Nabawi and other religious occasions, it went beyond their celebratory dimension to evoke religious and historical values and connect them to the concepts of reform and expression. The study concludes that the religious discourse in Al-Manar helped transform the religious question into an arena of cultural and national resistance. Through this discourse, the newspaper sought to counter colonial interference in religious affairs and defend the Arab-Islamic identity of Algerian society.

Keywords: Al-Manar newspaper, religious issue, French colonial administration, religious reform, Al Mawlid al-Nabawi, Algerian national consciousness, cultural resistance, Arab-Islamic identity.

Introduction

The Algerian Arabic-language press was one of the most important spheres in which debates on the issues facing Algerian society took place during the first half of the twentieth century. Its function was not limited to reporting news; it also assumed cultural, reformist, and political roles, particularly in confronting colonial policies that affected the fundamental components of Algerian identity.

In this context, Al-Manar newspaper appeared in Algiers, publishing its first issue on 29 March 1951 under the direction of Mahmoud Bouzouzu. It continued to publish during the years immediately preceding the outbreak of the Algerian Liberation Revolution in 1954. In its discourse, the newspaper brought together political, social, cultural, and religious issues, making it an important source for studying the nature of national reformist discourse during that period.

The religious question occupies a particularly important place in the life of Algerian society because Islam was not merely a matter of belief and religious observance; it was also one of the fundamental pillars of collective identity. Consequently, the defence of religion in Algerian reformist discourse was linked to the defence of the Arabic language, education, religious institutions, and the preservation of the distinctive character of society.

This study therefore proceeds from the following central research question:

To what extent did the religious discourse in Al-Manar newspaper during the period from 1951 to 1954 contribute to transforming the religious question from a matter of religious observance and reform into an issue with national dimensions, particularly through the newspaper's position on the separation of Islam from the French government and its attention to religious seasons?

1. Al-Manar Newspaper and the Context in Which Its Religious Discourse Emerged

The first issue of Al-Manar was published in Algiers on 29 March 1951, with Mahmoud Bouzouzou serving as its director. Bibliographical catalogues indicate that the newspaper was published during the period from 1951 to 1954 and addressed a variety of political, cultural, social, and religious topics¹.

The nature of the ideas published in the newspaper reveals a journalistic project that extended beyond a narrow focus on religious matters. The religious question formed part of a broader vision of Algerian society based on reform, awareness-raising, and the preservation of its Arab-Islamic identity².

Accordingly, the study of religious discourse in Al-Manar should not be separated from the overall nature of the newspaper's project. Religion appeared intertwined with issues relating to education, language, society, institutions, rights, and freedoms. It is this interconnectedness that gives the newspaper's religious discourse its national significance. The preservation of religion was not an isolated objective detached from society; rather, it was linked to the preservation of one of the most important elements distinguishing Algerian society from colonial society.

Previous studies examining Al-Manar have confirmed that the newspaper addressed various religious and reformist issues, including the separation of religion from government, religious reform, religious occasions, and questions relating to Arab-Islamic identity.

2. The Separation of Islam from the French Government in Al-Manar's Discourse

❖ The Religious Question in Confrontation with the Colonial Administration

The separation of Islam from the French government was one of the demands associated with the Algerian reformist movement during the period following the Second World War. The issue was complex in nature. On the one hand, it concerned the independence of religious affairs and Islamic institutions; on the other, it concerned the ability of Algerian society to manage a fundamental aspect of its collective life independently of the control and domination of the colonial administration³.

¹ Abdelaziz Wabel, "The Journalistic Struggle of the Writer Mahmoud Bouzouzou in Al-Manar Newspaper 1951–1954," *Journal of Historical Research*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2023), p. 240.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 240–265.

³ Bashir al-Farahi Kacha, *Bright Pages from the History of the National Movement, 1951–1953: Al-Manar Newspaper as a Case Study*, vol. 1 (Algeria: Publications of the National Centre for Studies and Research on the National Movement and the 1 November 1954 Revolution), p. 34.

In this context, Al-Manar addressed the issue in several articles, including an article by Muhammad Abd al-Fattah al-Ani entitled “A Grave Religious Fatwa.”¹

The newspaper’s treatment of this subject reveals that it did not regard the relationship between the French administration and Islam as merely an administrative matter. Rather, it viewed it as an issue affecting the independence of the religious sphere within Algerian society.²

3. The “Case with No Judge” and the Transformation of the Religious Question into a Discourse of Protest

The issue of separating Islam from the French state provides a clear example of the intersection between religion and politics in Al-Manar’s discourse³. Among the most notable texts reflecting this intersection is the article by Sheikh al-Arabi al-Tabsi entitled “A Case with No Judge,” published in issue 13 of the newspaper on 12 December 1952. The article addressed the delay in resolving the issue of separating Islam from the state and linked this delay to what it regarded as an assault on Islamic law and religious institutions.⁴

The article’s title itself reveals the nature of the protest discourse adopted by the newspaper. The expression “(!) A Case with No Judge” does not imply that the issue was nonexistent; rather, it conveys the continued failure to address it through effective political and administrative measures.⁵

A university study based on the article indicates that al-Tabsi criticised the delay in resolving the issue and questioned the religious ruling concerning the suspension of certain acts of worship associated with mosques, considering the continued delay an assault on Islamic law and its institutions. Accordingly, it can be argued that the religious question was not a marginal concern within national discourse. Rather, it became one of the arenas of resistance to colonialism, particularly because control over religious institutions was closely connected to control over society itself.⁶

4. Religious Seasons in Al-Manar’s Discourse: From Celebration to the Recovery of Collective Memory

Al-Manar’s interest was not limited to the issue of separating religion from the administration; it also extended to religious occasions, including the Mawlid al-Nabawi⁷. The significance of these occasions in Algerian society lies in the fact that they were not merely seasonal religious rituals. They were also

¹ Abdelaziz Wabel, “The Journalistic Struggle of Mahmoud Bouzouzou in Al-Manar Newspaper (1951–1954),” *Journal of Historical Research*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2023), pp. 240–265.

² Farida Satimi and Mohamed Mdjawed, “The Educational Project of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars between 1932 and 1956: A Historical Study Based on Its Publications,” *Ida’at Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2021), pp. 55–72.

³ Ahmed Meryouche, “The Status of the Arabic Language in the Programmes of the Algerian Political Movement, 1926–1954,” *Journal of Research and Studies* [publication details unclear] (2013), p. 283.

⁴ The Algerian League for the Defence of Freedom of the Press and Respect for Press Rights, *Al-Manar*, vol. 1, no. 16 (30 July 1951); cited in Abidoun et al., *A Study of Al-Manar Newspaper (1951–1954)*, University of 8 May 1945, Guelma, 2023, p. 239.

⁵ Abdelaziz Wabel, “The Journalistic Struggle of Mahmoud Bouzouzou in Al-Manar Newspaper (1951–1954),” *Journal of Historical Research*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2023), pp. 240–265.

⁶ Al-Arabi al-Tabsi, “A Case with No Judge: The Issue of Separating Islam from the French State,” *Al-Manar*, 3rd year, no. 13 (12 December 1952), pp. 1–2.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

social and cultural occasions through which the community recalled its religious and historical memory and reaffirmed its civilisational affiliation.¹

Among the most notable texts through which this dimension can be analysed is Mahmoud Bouzouzou's article entitled "The Anniversary of the Prophet's Birthday: The Renewed Revolution," published in *Al-Manar*, third year, issue 49, on 20 November 1953. The article was subsequently republished in the book *The Works of Sheikh and Resistance Figure Mahmoud Bouzouzou*².

One notable feature of the article is that Bouzouzou does not treat the Mawlid merely as a celebratory occasion. Instead, he gives it an intellectual significance associated with the idea of change and revolution against the existing state of affairs. He begins with the concept of "revolution" and reinterprets it beyond its confinement to violence, fire, and bloodshed, linking it instead to the transformation of existing conditions and the establishment of new conditions that people consider more conducive to their well-being³.

Here, the function of religious occasions in journalistic discourse becomes clear. The Mawlid al-Nabawi shifts from being an occasion for recalling the Prophet's biography to becoming an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of change and reform. This transition from a religious occasion to a reformist significance is particularly important because it demonstrates that the religious discourse in *Al-Manar* was not merely a form of moral exhortation; it also carried intellectual, social, and national dimensions.

5. The Mawlid al-Nabawi and the Formation of National Consciousness

Invoking the Mawlid al-Nabawi within a colonial context was not culturally neutral. Algerian society was living under a colonial policy that sought to influence the foundations of its national identity, and the defence of Arab-Islamic memory constituted one form of resistance to the policy of assimilation.⁴

From this perspective, *Al-Manar*'s interest in the Mawlid can be understood as part of the process of reproducing collective memory. When a writer invokes the figure of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), this involves more than recalling a religious figure; it also entails invoking a system of values, including reform, justice, solidarity, and change. Consequently, transforming the Mawlid into an occasion for reflecting on revolution and change gives it a function that extends beyond its celebratory dimension⁵. This is evident in Bouzouzou's article, in which he links the concept of revolution to the transformation of existing conditions and emphasises that revolution should not be reduced to violent methods, as it can also involve changing reality through other means⁶. Thus, the use of the Mawlid in *Al-Manar*'s discourse contributed to producing a national meaning indirectly. If religion carries a

¹ Abdelaziz Wabel, "The Journalistic Struggle of Mahmoud Bouzouzou in *Al-Manar* Newspaper (1951–1954)," *Journal of Historical Research*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2023), pp. 240–265.

² Mahmoud Bouzouzou, "The Anniversary of the Prophet's Birth: The Renewed Revolution," *Al-Manar*, 3rd year, no. 49 (20 November 1953); reprinted in *The Collected Works of Mahmoud Bouzouzou*, pp. 494–495.

³ Mahmoud Bouzouzou, *The Collected Works of Mahmoud Bouzouzou*, pp. 494–495.

⁴ Mahmoud Bouzouzou, *The Collected Works of Mahmoud Bouzouzou*, pp. 294–295.

⁵ Mahmoud Bouzouzou, *ibid.*

⁶ Farida Satimi and Mohamed Mdjawed, *ibid.*, pp. 55–72.

message of reform and change, a society living under colonial rule cannot approach that message merely as a historical commemoration.¹

In this way, the religious occasion became a space for restoring collective self-confidence and rereading religious history as a source of values capable of confronting the realities of colonialism.

6. The Religious Question and the Defence of Arab-Islamic Identity

The national dimension of the religious question becomes clearer when examined within the broader framework of identity². French colonialism did not confront a society devoid of cultural foundations. Rather, it dealt with a society connected to Islam, Arab identity, and a distinctive historical memory. For this reason, the defence of Islam became closely linked to the defence of the Arabic language and cultural institutions.³

Al-Manar addressed issues concerning the Algerian people, the Maghreb, and the Arab-Islamic nation as part of its broader discourse. This is confirmed by the specialised study of Mahmoud Bouzouzou's journalistic activities in the newspaper.⁴

Accordingly, the call for independence in religious affairs was not separate from the defence of Arab-Islamic identity. The mosque was not merely a place of worship; it was also an institution for education and socialisation. Likewise, the waqf (Islamic endowment) was not merely a form of religious property but was connected to the continuity of religious and educational institutions.⁵

This helps explain why the religious question intersected with issues relating to Arabic education, social reform, and national identity.

7. The Distinctive Features of Al-Manar's Religious Discourse on the Eve of the Revolution

The significance of studying the period from 1951 to 1954 lies in the fact that it represents the final years preceding the outbreak of the Algerian Liberation Revolution⁶. This does not mean that Al-Manar's discourse was revolutionary in the direct military sense. Rather, its significance lies in its contribution to developing a set of ideas and values associated with the rejection of colonial rule⁷.

These values are reflected in the defence of, and calls for, the independence of religious institutions; the defence of Arab-Islamic identity; and the invocation of the values of reform and change.⁸

¹ 3. Ahmed Meryouche, "The Status of the Arabic Language in the Programmes of the Algerian Political Movement (1926–1954)," p. 253; Farida Satimi and Mohamed Mdjawed, "The Educational Project of the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars between 1932 and 1956: A Historical Study Based on Its Publications," *Ida'at Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2021), pp. 55–72.

² Mahmoud Bouzouzou, "The Anniversary of the Prophet's Birth: The Renewed Revolution," in *The Collected Works of Mahmoud Bouzouzou*, pp. 494–495.

³ Mahmoud Bouzouzou, *ibid.*

⁴ Bourahdoune, Manar, and Abba Abdouni. *A Study of the Algerian Newspaper Al-Manar (1951–1954)*. Master's dissertation, University of 8 May 1945, Guelma, Algeria, 2023.

⁵ Abdelaziz Wabel, "The Journalistic Struggle of Mahmoud Bouzouzou in Al-Manar Newspaper (1951–1954)," *Journal of Historical Research*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2023), pp. 240–265.

⁶ Ahmed Meryouche, "The Status of the Arabic Language in the Programmes of the Algerian Political Movement (1926–1954)," pp. 253–278.

⁷ Mahmoud Bouzouzou, "The Anniversary of the Prophet's Birth: The Renewed Revolution," in *The Collected Works of Mahmoud Bouzouzou*, pp. 494–495.

⁸ Mahmoud Bouzouzou, *ibid.*

During this period, the national and reformist press helped connect specific issues to broader national concerns. Demands for the administration to relinquish control over religious affairs were no longer merely religious matters; calls for freedom for Arabic education were no longer merely cultural concerns; and the defence of Islamic institutions was no longer merely an administrative issue¹. Instead, all these demands became different expressions of a single fundamental issue: the right of Algerians to preserve their identity and manage the affairs of their society independently of colonial domination.² This highlights the historical value of Al-Manar's discourse, as it reveals the continued development of national consciousness in the years immediately preceding the outbreak of the Liberation Revolution.³

Conclusion

The study of the religious question in the discourse of Al-Manar newspaper during the period from 1951 to 1954 reveals that religion was neither marginal nor separate from the national issues occupying Algerian society during the final years of colonial rule. Rather, it was one of the areas in which religious, cultural, political, and national dimensions converged.

An analysis of al-Arabi al-Tabssi's article "A Case with No Judge" demonstrates that the delay in resolving the issue of separating religion from the state was viewed as part of a broader problem concerning colonial control over religious institutions. Through this discourse, the religious question was transformed into an issue of rights and freedom and, consequently, into a national concern.

As for Al-Manar's interest in religious occasions, particularly the Mawlid al-Nabawi, it carried significance extending beyond celebration and the performance of religious rites. The commemoration of the Mawlid made it possible to revisit religious values in light of the concepts of reform and change, as demonstrated particularly in Mahmoud Bouzouzou's article "The Anniversary of the Prophet's Birthday: The Renewed Revolution."

The religious occasion thus became a space for recovering collective memory and consolidating values that contributed to the formation of national consciousness.

The study also demonstrates that the religious discourse in Al-Manar was closely connected to the defence of Arab-Islamic identity. Mosques, religious institutions, and religious occasions were not separate elements but interconnected components of a single social and cultural system.

On this basis, it can be argued that Al-Manar contributed to transforming the religious question from a subject concerning institutions and religious observances into an arena of cultural and national resistance. This resistance did not always take the form of direct political confrontation; it also manifested itself in the defence of collective memory, identity, religious institutions, and society's right to manage its own affairs and determine its own future.

¹ Abdelaziz Wabel, "The Journalistic Struggle of Mahmoud Bouzouzou in Al-Manar Newspaper (1951–1954)," *Journal of Historical Research*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2023), pp. 240–265.

² Abdelaziz Wabel, *National and Maghrebi Issues through Al-Manar Newspaper (1951–1954)*, pp. 147–148.

³ Ahmed Meryouche, "The Status of the Arabic Language in the Programmes of the Algerian Political Movement (1926–1954)," pp. 253–278.

The significance of this conclusion lies in its potential to encourage a reconsideration of the concept of national resistance during the years preceding the Liberation Revolution. Resistance was not confined to political organisation or party activity; it also encompassed the press, reform, culture, and religion. Accordingly, Al-Manar's discourse on the religious question can be regarded as one of the expressions of a transitional phase in which reformist demands evolved from the defence of religion and Islamic institutions towards a more explicit association with freedom and national rights. This makes the study of such discourse particularly important for understanding some of the intellectual and cultural developments that preceded the outbreak of the Liberation Revolution in November 1954.

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