

Ben Bādīs, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd (1889-1940)

‘Abd al-Ḥamīd ibn Muṣṭafā ibn Makkī ibn Bādīs (Ben Bādīs), was an Algerian scholar, exegete, educator, Islamic reformer and spiritual figurehead of cultural nationalism. He was born in 1889 into an ancient, landowning family of urban notables and *‘ulamā* in Constantine (Qsanṭīna), the principal inland city of eastern Algeria. His family, descended from the fifth/eleventh-century Zirid rulers of Ifrīqiya (modern Tunisia and east/central Algeria), had maintained considerable cultural prestige and an influential social position in the city since its conquest by the French in 1837. His grandfather, Si Makkī ben Bādīs (d. 1889), retained his post of *qāḍī*, was decorated with the *légion d’honneur* by Napoleon III in 1864, and served on the French administration’s Council of Public Education in the 1870s. His father, Muḥammad Muṣṭafā (b.1868), was an adjunct judge and member of the colonial parliament, the *Délégations financières*; his younger brother Mawlūd “Zubayr” passed the French *baccalauréat* and became a lawyer, local politician, and director of a francophone newspaper. The education of ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, the eldest son, in Arabic and the Islamic sciences, first in Constantine and then (1908-1912) at the Zayṭūna in Tunis, therefore held particular importance not only for his own socialisation but also for the family’s investment in both established (Arab-Islamic) and emerging (French) forms of élite cultural capital and professional training. But, coming into public life in the tumultuous years after the First World War, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd would find his own vocation not simply in the familial preservation of an older cultural prestige, but in a new vision of Arab-Islamic culture and education as a means of religious revival, social reform, and, ultimately, national emancipation.

As a young man, his intellectual ability was already remarked upon. In late 1912, he went on pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina; in the latter city, he visited his former teacher,

Hamdān al-Wanīsī, who had emigrated to the Hijāz in 1904, and from him, on his return to Algeria via Cairo, he took a letter of recommendation to Muḥammad Bakhīt al-Muṭī‘ī, the eminent Azhari scholar who shortly afterward would be appointed muftī of Egypt, and who accorded Ben Bādīs an *ijāza* (certificate) made out in his own hand. ‘Abd al-Hamīd thus returned to the Maghrib carrying both scholarly credentials from one of the most senior ‘ulamā of the day, and the advice of his former mentor that he should neither accept any public office, nor employ his learning to seek one. Instead, he set up as an independent scholar at al-jāmi‘ al-akhḍar (the Green Mosque) in the old city of Constantine, where he began teaching early in 1914. After the end of the First World War, his activities slowly expanded, in tandem with the growth of Algerian Muslim mass politics and the emerging social movements that would provide the basis of a more assertive anticolonial nationalism.

From his lectures at al-jāmi‘ al-akhḍar, Ben Badis’s educational and social work developed, first within Constantine and then further afield, as he came to be recognised as the central figure in a network of like-minded reformist scholars. He was patron of the Jam‘iyat al-tarbiyya wa-’l-ta‘līm (Society for Education and Instruction) that provided primary schooling for boys and girls in Constantine, and was a leading personality in the creation of reformist cultural and educational circles (*nawādī*) of which the most prominent would be al-Nādī al-taraqqī (the ‘Progress Club’) in Algiers, founded in 1927, and Dār al-ḥadīth, an independent Islamic school created in Tlemcen (Tilimsān) ten years later. Also in the 1920s, he moved into the growing field of Arabic-language journalism, first as an occasional contributor and then with his own organ, *al-Muntaqid* (The Critic), a weekly ‘political, educational and critical journal’ first published in Constantine on 2 July 1925. Attacked by ‘calumnious denunciations’ (‘Al-Muntaqid wa’l-washāh’, *al-Muntaqid* no. 14, 1 Oct. 1925), the journal was suspended in October the same year, only to be succeeded at once by *al-Shihāb* (The Meteor), which appeared on 12 November 1925 and ran until the outbreak of

war in 1939. A forum for political news and comment, literary reviews, exhortations to social renewal through instruction, commerce, cultural revival and religious reform, *al-Shihāb* provided an important meeting point for reformist personalities and a platform for the dissemination of their ideas throughout Algeria and the Maghrib.

In May, 1931, Ben Badis and his colleagues founded the Jam‘iyat al-‘ulamā’ al-muslimīn al-jazā’irīyyīn (Association of Algerian Muslim ‘ulama), a civil society association established under the terms of the French Law on Associations of 1901, in Algiers. The Association, an organisational vehicle for the spread of reformist doctrine and education, published its own journal (under several titles, culminating in *al-Baṣā’ir*) and set up sections, schools, and study circles across Algeria and among Algerian emigrants in France, becoming a major network of cultural nationalism by the late 1930s. In 1936, Ben Badis and the ‘ulamā’ were central to the establishment of the first Algerian Muslim Congress that presented a major platform of reform proposals to the newly-elected government of the Popular Front in Paris. Despite the avowedly apolitical nature of the Association and of his own educational and doctrinal work, Ben Badis was thus inevitably drawn into political life. At first, he hoped for a degree of accommodation with the French colonial state that might allow for a cultural ‘renewal’ of Algerian society from within what remained of its own cultural and legal institutions, in a partnership with French economic and political institutions that would lead to an Algerian emancipation from colonialism through the extension of civil rights. But his growing, autonomous authority, and the increasing perception of the Association of ‘ulamā’ as a cultural threat to the Islam of the Sufi *ṭarīqas* (‘brotherhoods’), and as a political threat to French sovereignty, led to tensions within his own family, within local notable politics, between reformists and the leaders of the *ṭarīqas* (many of whom had initially been receptive to reformist doctrinal arguments) and between reformists and the colonial administration. Despite the protection of his influential family, from 1929 onwards

Ben Badis faced interference with his freedom to speak in public. Access to state-funded mosques (i.e., all mosque buildings in Algeria other than those built independently by local communities with their own funds) was forbidden to the reformists in 1933, and in 1938 the colonial administration began a campaign to close down their independent schools. Ben Badis's personal prestige and the influence of his movement were only enhanced. In particular, he retained an immense personal authority in Constantine, across all social classes and political persuasions; when anti-Jewish rioting broke out in the city in August, 1934, he was instrumental in restoring order and putting an end to communal violence. His standing in the community was visibly demonstrated at his funeral; on the day after his premature death (16 April 1940), following a struggle with diabetes, a crowd of eight thousand mourners, including some one thousand women, followed the funeral procession through the city to the cemetery.

Aside from some minor published works (a critical edition of *al-ʿAwāṣim min al-qawāṣim*, a doctrinal treatise by the Andalusī qāḍī, Abu Bakr ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1148), published in 1925-28, and a polemical pamphlet of 1938 against the Tijāniyya *ṭarīqa*), Ben Badis's writings, including opinions on matters of social and political significance, writings on *ḥadīth*, and his *tafsīr* (Qur'anic commentary), which was serialised under the title *Majālis al-tadhkīr* between 1929 and 1939, appeared in the press. His preoccupation with societal progress through religious reform (*iṣlāḥ*) turned on the classic themes of early twentieth century salafi thought: the centrality of the doctrine of *tawḥīd* (divine unicity, reflected in the unity and indivisibility of the Muslim community); the return to the Qur'an and sunna and to a 'purified' orthopraxy stripped of *bida'āt* (reprehensible innovations); the harnessing of critical and rational-scientific thought to Islamic ethical norms for the resolution of social problems, and opposition to the 'superstitions', personalised charisma, and social influence associated with the brotherhoods and a popular religion that came, in the reformists' view, to

be characterised as mere 'maraboutism'. At his death he would be regarded, as both the colonial authorities and his followers put it, 'with veneration' and (somewhat ironically) 'as a saint'. Later, 'his name... wrapped in legend' (as Ali Merad, himself belonging to the second generation of Algerian reformist scholars, wrote in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*) he would be regarded primarily as the spiritual father of Algerian nationalism and of the revolutionary war of independence (1954-62).

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