

# Arabic in Algeria: Identity Tainted by Politics

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Articles & Testimony

**Amid continuing debate over school curricula, Francophone and Islamist movements are both exploiting language issues to further their political agendas, while the government attempts to distract the public from dire economic problems.**

Since July 2015, a heated ideological debate on language and its relation to national identity has occupied Algeria, sparked by the Ministry of Education's decision to use "dialect" or "colloquial" Arabic language in teaching during the early stages of primary school. The inspector-general of educational affairs unveiled this decision at the ministry during a press conference to present the recommendations of a pedagogical forum held under the direct supervision of Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal and designed to examine Algeria's weak educational system. Minister of National Education Nouria Benghabrit-Remaoun has justified the decision to switch to Arabic dialect as a decision based on "purely pedagogical motives."

Benghabrit-Remaoun emphasized that the use of local dialect in schools is not intended to rob Arabic of its position as Algeria's official language as protected under the constitution, implemented after Algerian independence in 1962. Instead, teaching in Arabic dialect will be an attempt to bring knowledge closer to new students in preparation to teach them standard Arabic at later stages. Currently, according to the minister, Algerian students are suddenly hit with standard Arabic instruction at the beginning of their school life, even though most are at that point only accustomed to speaking either one of a variety of Algerian dialects heavily inflected with French or Spanish or Amazigh language. Nevertheless, the minister's statements and the proposed change to Algerian schools created waves of anger throughout the country to the extent that some have called for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to intervene and remove Benghabrit-Remaoun from office.

Leading advocates of Standard Arabic include supporters of the Islamic movement headed by the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama, Movement of Society for Peace president and Muslim Brotherhood affiliate Abderrazak Makri, and the Algerian National Movement headed by chairman of the Algerian Association for the Protection of the

Arabic Language and alleged Algerian Baathist leader Othman Saadi. These Standard Arabic advocates believe that the use of dialect in a teaching environment boils down to a plot against the Standard Arabic language, which already suffers from restrictions and marginalization compared to the use of French. Many Algerians see French as the language of colonization and thereby an unsuitable language for education. And although most Algerians use French in their daily conversations, they view education conducted in French, or by extension French-influenced dialects, as a continuation of Algerian dependence on France, the colonizer.

Supporters of Standard Arabic believe that teaching in dialect "threatens the fundamentals of the Algerian nation and puts its unity at risk." They also raise a fundamental question, asking which dialect the ministry would choose for the new language of instruction out of Algeria's dozens of local dialects. Favoring one dialect over another for schooling could produce serious social divisions and in turn threaten the unity and solidarity of Algerians.

There are also ideological arguments in opposition to the Ministry of Education's proposal. According to a statement issued by the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama, "The Arabic language is one of the pillars of Algeria's cultural identity, and we cannot bypass it under any pretext whatsoever." Meanwhile, the Islamist National Building Movement claimed that, "The decision to teach dialect at the expense of standard Arabic will sow chaos in the country," and called on President Bouteflika to intervene by lifting the freeze on the Arabic Language Generalization Law. The law was passed in January 1991 and frozen on July 4, 1992; that same year, former president Liamine Zeroual lifted the freeze and established the Supreme Council of the Arabic Language in Algeria to monitor Standard Arabic's use and advancement. But the law never entered into effect, and the activity of said Supreme Council was restricted to literary seminars.

Islamists and the Arab nationalist movement blame Standard Arabic's difficulties on the French lobby that is deeply spread throughout the Algerian administration. They believe that this group has thwarted all attempts to Arabize Algerian official departments and institutions as these institutions operate primarily in French, despite the constitutional passage listing Standard Arabic as Algeria's official language.

In response to this Francophone movement, social network activists launched a campaign to collect one million signatures on a petition, which demanded that President Bouteflika substitute French with English in Algerian schools. They argued that French is headed toward extinction even in its own country, whereas English is the language of science and technological development.

Several major Algerian figures have also been vocal in their opposition to the recent decision to implement dialect in school systems. Algerian political sociologist Nasser Gaby argued that "this decision is not an Algerian national decision, but rather comes under international pressure, and is similar to the many other decisions that were previously imposed in the context of globalization and diminution of countries' sovereignty."

Algerian novelist and critic Omar Azradj believes that "blaming the failure and weak linguistic level of the educational system on Standard Arabic is not an innocent move. It rather reflects malicious intentions that continue to question the ability of Arabic to be a strong means of cultural performance." Additionally, Azradj links the new decision to a longer history of colonialism, saying that "The inclusion of dialect in the Algerian educational system in order to destroy the Arabic language is not a new scenario. It was planned during the colonial era ever since 1905 and then resurfaced after independence amongst individuals and a few male and female researchers who called for it."

Hostility against the decision also seems connected to enmity against the minister of national education herself, which began when she took office in May of last year. Because of her last name "Remaoun," some Algerians raised questions about her origins, arguing that her last name might be "Jewish." Her participation in the so-called Bin Zagho Commission, which President Bouteflika tasked to prepare a reform plan for the educational system, has

further increased the criticisms. The Bin Zagho Commission came out with recommendations that Islamists considered a "Westernization scheme" threatening the fundamentals of the Algerian nation. Benghabrit-Remaoun has opened herself up to more criticism by committing serious errors when speaking Standard Arabic: she can barely form a complete sentence in the language. These factors have all led to the accusation that the minister is part of a plot against Standard Arabic.

On the other hand, advocates of the Francophone movement believe that the Islamist-led smear campaign against the minister of national education proves that the Islamists do not want the implementation of any reforms in the weak educational system, whose curricula are immersed in a single dominant ideology and language. French-language print media and well-known political figures -- most notably *al-Watan* newspaper, the communist Democratic and Social Movement, the Workers' Party led by Trotskyite Louisa Hanoune, and former president of the Rally for Culture and Democracy Said Saadi -- launched several campaigns to support the minister's initiative. These arguments state that Arabic was imposed on Algerians, and that Algerians would not have learned the language otherwise.

Supporters of this movement strongly believe that French is the only savior from ignorance for the Algerian people and blame the current educational system for contributing to the spread of religious extremism, since educational programs include materials that encourage religious hatred. Some link this to the generation of extremists who orchestrated the miseries of the nineties, or "Black Decade," that led to more than 200,000 Algerian deaths due to terrorism.

Looking at the essence and depth of this ideological polarization between the Francophone and Standard Arabic supporters, one can see that the issue of language in Algeria is primarily a political and ideological, rather than pedagogical, problem. The Francophone movement, while blaming Arabic and its advocates for Algeria's political, economic, and cultural disappointments, has failed to produce a modernist plan to free Algerian society from the impact of fundamentalism that has threatened the country for two full decades, despite its supporters' position as the largest decisionmaking power throughout Algerian institutions.

Conversely, proponents of Standard Arabic use the language, along with other components of their preferred identity, to achieve their political goals mainly related to the spread of their own ideas into Algerian society rather than advancement of the language itself. For them, Standard Arabic becomes a tool to promote the agendas of certain political, sectarian, and ethnic groups. Ironically, most of these proponents speak French, and some of them even send their children to study in French universities.

But most important, identity-related issues are often stirred up in Algeria by the authorities in order to keep Algerians distracted from the economic and social problems they continue to face. The dialect issue has come to the fore at a time when Algeria is suffering through a severe financial crisis. The economy has lost more than \$50 billion in less than a year due to the collapse of oil prices in global markets. Algeria relies on oil revenues for 98 percent of its general budget and economic programs, leading to general economic downturn in the wake of falling oil prices. Compounding the economic danger, the country's reserves of foreign currency fell from \$200 billion in August 2014 to \$157 billion as of this writing and are expected to fall by another \$125 billion by the end of 2015.

Moreover, the collapse of oil prices caused an unprecedented drop in the value of the local currency against the dollar. At one time, one U.S. dollar equaled 70 Algerian dinars. Now, one dollar equals 105 dinars, triggering a massive increase in the price of consumer goods. The country's revenues are thus expected to decline by 70 percent beginning at the end of this year, which may force the government to resort to borrowing money from the International Monetary Fund, thereby threatening the state's sovereignty through foreign intervention.

The dangerous economic situation has created a certain amount of confusion in the Algerian government, forcing it

to announce the adoption of austerity measures. Faced with pressure from the opposition and Algerians' apprehension of an uncertain future, the government found itself obliged to create discussions on tangential issues to distract the people from focusing on possible ways of addressing the serious issues threatening the Algerian economy. And what better way to stir up controversy and distract people from the crisis that will face the country in 2018 than identity-related issues?

Returning to the issue of Standard Arabic language instruction, decisions related to this issue -- a very sensitive one in Algerian society -- should occur in conjunction with an open discussion involving the various political and cultural groups and civil society organizations. This dialogue would allow the country to reach a consensus that would spare it from divisions that threaten the unity and solidarity of its society. In contrast, future language-related decisions should not be injected with the political and ideological agendas of one specific group or another, since there are no assurances that a certain group represents the majority of Algerians' views.

Algeria's educational system should be insulated from political and ideological polarization. Attempts at reform should be carried out through academically motivated curricula developed in accordance with a strategic vision that contributes to creating human capital that will put the country out of its complete dependence on oil revenues.

*Yacine Boudhane is an Algerian journalist. This article was originally published on the [Fikra Forum website](http://fikraforum.org/?p=7685) (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=7685>). ♦*

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