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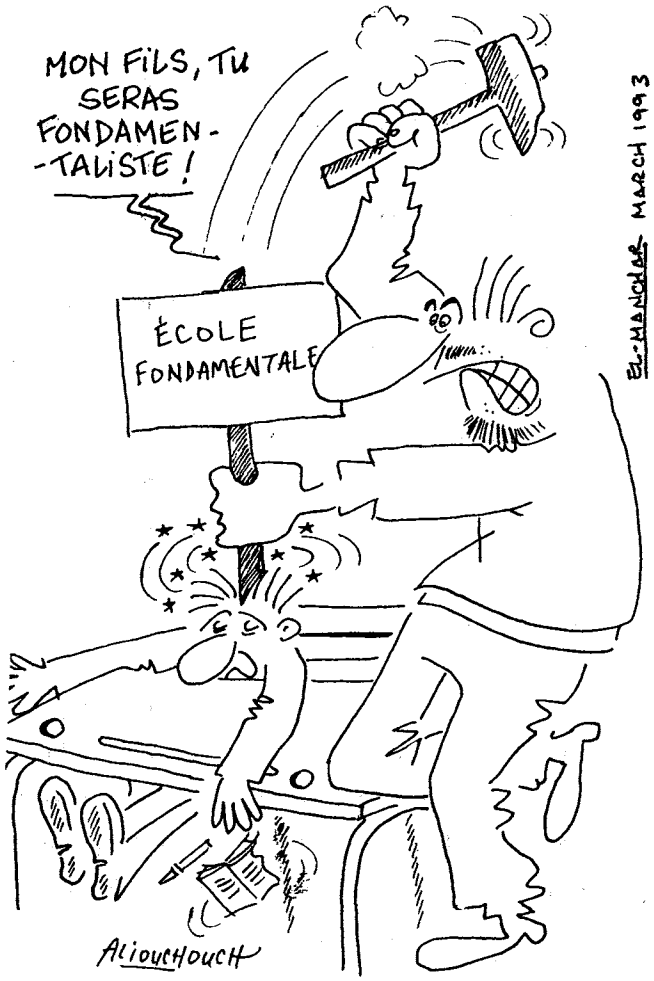
Algiers, ALGERIA

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Mr. Peter B. Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock St.
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

In all the press about the difficulties here between the *Arabo-Islamists* and the *secular-modernists*, journalists generally fail to mention one of the key factors: Arabization. The current political struggle is partly a battle between those who grew up with the secular French education system and those who were educated in an Arabo-Islamic system.



Although the installation of an Arabic language education system (with "Islamic science" as a required subject) and the adoption of the national motto "Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language and Algeria is my country" might have seemed like a good way to combat the French colonial influence when the country won its independence in 1962, the project has given way to whole generation of what are popularly called *illetres bilingues* or bilingual illiterates.

Young Algerians generally communicate in *derja*, an unwritten local dialect of Arabic that borrows heavily from French and Catalan. They watch French television and attend school in Arabic taught by teachers generally often fluent in French.

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bicultural. Instead of using that advantage to progress, we spent all our energy destroying one of our greatest assets," he said.

A colleague of his and professor of Classical Arabic (who's son is a pharmacist in Paris and who, himself, is now living in France) interrupted (in French). "No, no, no. Arabic is a rich language and we did well to introduce it. There's no reason you can't teach chemistry in Arabic."

"Beyond a very basic level, it's nearly impossible," countered the chemistry professor. "There aren't enough texts in Arabic and the vocabulary is lacking. My students aren't able to take advantage of recent publications because of this Arabization business," argued the chemistry professor.

A janitor who had been listening quietly in the corner of the room could no longer resist. "I'm not an intellectual or anything, but all I know is that my son would love to study chemistry but can't. He has had so little French in school that he can't hope to succeed."

The education system is somewhere between Arabic and French and the process of making it fully Arabic is going full steam ahead even while the merits of the goal of the process remain widely controversial.

And the problems run deeper than that. Because most government offices and larger businesses are still run largely in French, recent graduates who have not had the means to visit France or pay private French language tutors, have little hope of getting good jobs.

The editor-in-chief of Le Matin, one of Algeria's many francophone newspapers told me it was getting harder and harder to recruit good journalists because few graduates had a sufficient level of French. Yet many Algerians, especially those living in bigger cities, depend on the francophone press because they are unable to get through an article in classical Arabic.

So where does this Arabized and mostly unemployed youth go? Many head for mosques, which, as part of the Arabization process, were until recently built at an astounding rate of 200 per year, according to journalist Aissa Khelladi. There are currently an estimated 11,000 mosques in Algeria, about about 9,000 of which were built since independence. These mosques provide employment for the growing number of young Algerian *imams*, which has jumped from 1,200 in 1965 to the present estimate of about 10,000.

The *Arabization* policy has effectively split the population in two. Those with careers outside the religious establishment are generally part of what may well be Algeria's last bicultural and bilingual generation. Those who have recently graduated or are still in school, were raised on Arabic and Islamic science and feel little affinity for the francophone establishment to which they have been denied entry.

The military may be cracking down harder than ever on militant Islamists, but the system which has produced this new generation is going stronger than ever. Next year the crucial high school exam that decides whether students can continue to the university level will, for the first time, include Islam in addition to reading, writing and arithmetic. Students cramming for the exam will surely head to the very mosques Algerian soldiers are now watching with such anxiety.

Best regards,

Katherine

Received in Hanover, August 23, 1993.