



Algerian Printing Houses During the Colonial Era (1896–1954 AD)

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Abstract:

Algeria witnessed the emergence of several printing houses that provided a powerful impetus to cultural activity. These establishments were not limited to the Arabic language but specialized in both Arabic and French, covering *various* aspects of life. Furthermore, they kept pace with the lived experiences of Algerian society during the French colonial era (1830–1962).

This article, titled "**Algerian Printing Houses during the Colonial Era (1896–1954),**" aims to explore these institutions and their impact.

Keywords: Algerian printing houses, French colonialism, Algerian printing models, Al-Thaalibiya Press.

- Introduction:

The emergence of Algerian printing houses was closely linked to the French occupation. The first was the "African Printing House," which was carried aboard a ship during the French military campaign and used to print the military newspaper *L'Estafette* at the Port of Sidi Fredj. However, printing houses established by Algerians appeared later, as the process of publishing their own newspapers and articles required immense effort and resources.

Through this presentation, we will attempt to explore the Algerian printing houses of the colonial era that left a significant mark on Algeria's history. A prime example is the "Thaalibiya Press," founded by Rodossi Kaddour, which had a profound impact and widespread reach, not only nationally but also across the African continent. Along with other printing houses, these will be the focus of this intervention, titled: "**Algerian Printing Houses during the Colonial Era (1896–1954).**"

- The Emergence of Algerian Printing Houses:

Printing houses in Algeria emerged alongside the French occupation and were not known prior to that period. The first printing press was the "African Printing House" (La Presse Africaine), which was transported on a ship during the military campaign. It was used to print the military newspaper *L'Estafette* at the Port of Sidi Fredj¹. This newspaper was published in French and supervised by French army officers. It contained information regarding the French campaign, along with political

¹ Abu al-Kasim Sa'adallah, **Cultural History of Algeria**, Vol. 5, Special Edition, Algiers: Alam al-Ma'rifa for Publishing and Distribution, 2015, p. 305.



news specific to France, and was distributed to soldiers and the departments in charge of the war against Algeria¹.

In June 1830, that printing press was converted into an official press under the new administration, where decrees, circulars, and similar documents were printed². In 1832, the first bilingual printing press (French and Arabic) was introduced, which was utilized for printing Arabic-French and French-Arabic dictionaries³.

It is worth noting that private French printing houses were numerous. According to a 1957 census, the number of French printing presses in Algeria reached 280, employing 4,500 workers. Consequently, every city came to have a commercial French printing house specializing in the printing of newspapers, books, circulars, cards, commercial ledgers, and advertisements⁴.

The establishment of this press was associated with the brothers Rodossi Ahmed and Kaddour Beni Mourad, who were of Turkish origin and had settled in Algeria. They possessed a profound interest in the sale and printing of books. Due to a combination of favorable circumstances and support, they decided to establish a printing house and a distribution bookstore in 1314 AH / 1895 AD. They founded what would later be known as the 'Thaalibiya Press' (Imprimerie Thaalibia).

Alongside the press, they opened a bookstore for sales and reading called the 'Literary Bookstore' (La Librairie Littéraire), located on Mustafa bin Ismail Street—known today as Ahmed Bouzrina Street. The French authorities facilitated their distribution networks, allowing Thaalibiya's publications to reach West Africa and other French colonies, as well as gaining widespread fame in Tunisia and Morocco⁵.

The Rodosi Printing House was headquartered on Rue du Quartier Arabe (Arab Quarter Street) in the Casbah, the heart of the Algerian capital. Over time, the press specialized in religious texts and the Holy Qur'an, publishing a massive legacy of Islamic literature. It stood unrivaled in its field, with no other printing house able to compete.

The Al-Thaalibia Press was unique for its distinct script, derived from the Maghrebi (North African) calligraphy, which was developed by the renowned calligrapher Sheikh Al-Safti (may God have mercy on him).

The first edition of the Mus'haf issued by Al-Thaalibia Press was in 1905, and it was honored by the handwriting of Sheikh Al-Mansali. Subsequently, in 1907, the press published the final quarter (Rub' al-Akhir) of the Quran, written by the brilliant calligrapher and artist Omar Racim. Finally, Rodosi selected the calligrapher Mohamed Cherradi—well known as Al-Safti or Al-Safati—to write the entire Mus'haf.

¹ Zouhir Ihaddaden, *The Written Press in Algeria*, Algiers: Office des Publications Universitaires (OPU), 2017, p. 25

² Abu al-Kasim Sa'adallah, *op. cit.*, p. 305

³ Radhouane Ben Brahim Lakhchine, "The Mus'haf of Al-Thaalibia Press: The First Printed Mus'haf in Algeria – Presentation and Study," *Al-Mi'yar Journal*, p. 10

⁴ Abu al-Qasim Sa'adallah, *op. cit.*, PP305-306

⁵ Abdelhadi Laagab, "History of Printing the Mus'haf in Algeria," *Risalat al-Masjid Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Algiers: Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments, 2022, p. 60.



It is important to note that the early editions of the first "Tha'alibiya Mus'haf" specifically the third edition in 1911 bore the inscription: "Al-Tha'alibiya Printing House, owned by Ahmed bin Murad al-Turki and his brother." This indicates that Ahmed was the primary person in charge, as he was the elder; it was customary for ownership to be attributed to the eldest sibling.

In the second edition of the Mus'haf in 1924, the phrasing was amended to: "Al-Tha'alibiya Printing House and Literary Library, owned by Rodosi Kaddour bin Murad al-Turki." This reflects a shift in ownership, likely due to his brother's passing between 1911 and 1924.

Furthermore, in later editions of the Tha'alibi Mus'haf—specifically by 1917—the phrase evolved to: "Rodosi Kaddour bin Murad al-Turki and Sons Company." This signifies its transformation into a fully established company, indicating that he had married and his children had grown to share the responsibilities and duties of the business with him¹.

1. Models of Algerian Printing Houses:

- **The Algerian Islamic Press:** The Algerian Islamic Press in Constantine is considered one of the enduring legacies of the Reformist Movement (Al-Islah) immortalized by history. It was founded by a group of elite youth to serve the Arabic language and the Algerian Renaissance in 1343 AH / 1925 AD.

The idea of founding the Algerian Islamic Printing House dates back to the period when Sheikh Ibn Badis was contributing articles to the newspaper An-Najah (established in 1337 AH / 1919 AD). The primary motivation for its creation was his urgent need for a dedicated press to publish a newspaper that would serve as the official voice of his reformist movement, which he had initiated in 1332 AH / 1914 AD.

Sheikh Ibn Badis sought a platform that could ensure the movement's continuity and remain secure from external pressures, as he was well aware of the harassment and obstacles imposed by the colonial administration. He had experienced this firsthand through his involvement with An-Najah. Despite trusting the newspaper's management with the "secrets" of his writings, his inclinations and objectives eventually became known to the occupation authorities. This surveillance was a key factor leading to his independence from the newspaper and the subsequent departure of Khalil Ibn al-Qashi from the An-Najah printing press, Ibn al-Qashi recounts the details, saying:

"I was working at the An-Najah printing press, and I was a relative of Ismail Mami (Bin Abdi), its editor-in-chief. Having mastered the art of printing, I observed that Sheikh Ibn Badis used to contribute chapters to An-Najah under various pseudonyms—such as 'Ibn al-Islam', 'Al-Qasantini', and 'Al-Absi'—to avoid revealing his true identity. However, these articles would often reach the colonial administration, exposing their secrets sometimes even before they were published. This caused the Sheikh great distress.

One day, I said to him: 'Why not establish your own newspaper to be the voice of your movement, and set up a dedicated printing house for it? I promise you that I will leave my job at An-Najah to work with you.' He replied that he would consider the matter and make his decision after

¹ Radhouane Ben Brahim Lakhchine, *ibid.*, p 10



performing Istikhara (the prayer for divine guidance). Later, he announced his acceptance and selected the team who would work alongside him¹.

- Al-Najah Press (The Success Press):

Al-Najah (The Success), founded by Sheikh Abdelhafid bin al-Hashimi in Constantine in 1919, represents the first attempt to establish an Arabic-language press following World War I. Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis assisted in its foundation and contributed to its editorial content during its early stages. However, his collaboration did not last due to disagreements regarding the press's reformist orientation (Manhaj al-Islahi). Initially, the publication was weekly, then became semi-weekly, and eventually transitioned into a daily newspaper. It continued its operations until after the outbreak of the Glorious Revolution of Liberation (The Algerian War of Independence)².

It continued its operations until 1956, despite the fact that many other publications and printing houses had ceased activity at the outbreak of World War II in 1939³.

On the other hand, some suggest that the newspaper continued its publication until 1957, and only ceased to exist following the death of its editor, Mami Ismail. Its director, Abdelhafid al-Hashimi, subsequently moved on to hold the position of Mufti (Official Issuer of Fatwas)⁴.

- The Arabic Printing House (Al-Matba'a al-Arabiyya):

The Arabic Printing House was established by Abu al-Yaqdhan, funded entirely by his private capital, starting in February 1931. However, Professor Abu al-Qasim Sa'dallah suggests that the date of its founding actually traces back to 1926.

The press was originally located in the Casbah (formerly on Rovigo Street, now known as Zabih Sharif Street) and remained operational until the era of independence. Later, it was relocated to the M'zab Valley (Ghardaia).

Regarding its publications, the newspaper Al-Balagh printed 32 of its issues at the Al-Irshadiya Printing House in the Saint-Eugène district (which was owned by the publishers of Al-Balagh), while six of its issues were printed at the Arabic Printing House.

- Al-Noor Newspaper (The Light):

The first issue of Al-Noor was published on September 15, 1931. It was subject to French colonial censorship and was printed at the "Arabic Press" (Al-Matba'a al-Arabiyya). Spanning four pages, the newspaper maintained a reformist orientation and served as a continuation of preceding publications, namely: Wadi M'zab, M'zab, and Al-Maghrib.

- Al-Nibras Newspaper (The Lantern):

¹ Abdelmalek Haddad, "The Algerian Islamic Press in Constantine," accessed November 11, 2024, 09:10 PM, available at: <https://oulama.dz/2017/02/17>

² Ahcene Tilani, *Al-Najah Newspaper: Its Reality and Role*, Army Popular Printing (Imprimerie Populaire de l'Armée), Algiers, 2007, pp. 37–39

³ Ammar Boutaba, "Constantine Society through Al-Najah Newspaper 1919–1956," Master's Thesis in Modern and Contemporary Maghreb History, supervised by Saleh Lammiche, University of Constantine, Academic Year 2009–2010 (1430–1431 AH), p. 31.

⁴ Moufidi Zakaria, *History of the Arabic Press in Algeria*, collected and edited by Ahmed Hamdi, Algiers: Moufidi Zakaria Publications, 2003, p. 70



Its inaugural issue was released on July 21, 1931. Only six issues were published before it was suspended by the French authorities on August 25, 1933. However, the French administration officially suppressed it on August 30, 1938, under the pretext that it was merely a second version (reincarnation) of the newspaper Al-Ummah.

- Al-Bustan Newspaper (The Orchard):

Established by Abu al-Yaqdhan in collaboration with Mr. Taamout Issa, the latter served as its official director starting June 1, 1933. This arrangement was a tactical move intended to circumvent and deceive the colonial administration. Al-Bustan was a weekly satirical and critical newspaper published every Tuesday; its first issue debuted on April 27, 1933.

- Al-Ummah Newspaper:

Its first issue was published on September 8, 1933. It was a weekly publication issued every Tuesday and printed at the 'Arabic Press' (Al-Matba'a al-Arabiya). It was the only newspaper among its peers to endure for a long period. The French administration kept it under close surveillance, causing deliberate harassment that forced Abu al-Yaqdhan to suspend the paper for an entire year. The second issue was eventually released on September 25, 1934. The newspaper continued regular publication until June 7, 1938, when the French authorities confiscated and suppressed it after a total of 170 issues had been published.

- Al-Furqan Newspaper:

Al-Furqan emerged on July 5, 1938, a month and a half after the suppression of Al-Ummah. It called for a return to the sources of the Holy Quran and campaigned against the enemies of reform (Al-Islah) who harbored hostility toward the leaders of the reformist movement.

- Al-Balagh Printing House:

Sheikh Ahmad ibn Aliwa founded Al-Balagh al-Jaza'iri to serve as the official voice of the Alawiya Order (Sufi Tariqa). The publication was established at a time when the reformist press had begun to launch attacks against the Order. Its first issue was released on December 24, 1926, in the city of Mostaganem, the headquarters of the mother Zawiya.

Initially, the newspaper was printed at the Alawiya Press. However, starting in 1930, its operations moved to the capital (Algiers), where a modern printing house was established. According to Sheikh Adda bin Tounes, the reason for this relocation was a desire by the administration to upgrade the newspaper and solidify its position in the public sphere. Consequently, Al-Balagh al-Jaza'iri experienced geographical instability, with its headquarters shifting between Algiers and Mostaganem.

Naming and Significance: The name Al-Balagh al-Jaza'iri (The Algerian Communication/Message) appears to be inspired by the Quranic verse: "Verily in this is a Message for people who worship God" and the Prophetic Hadith: "Convey from me, even if it is a single verse." The word "Algerian" was added to distinguish it from other publications like Al-Balagh in Egypt and Lebanon.

Al-Balagh al-Jaza'iri was the second newspaper issued by the Alawiya Order, following their first experience with Lisan al-Din in 1923. Through this, Sheikh Ibn Aliwa became the first Sufi Sheikh to enter the field of journalism. The newspaper was published weekly every Friday, with a



circulation of approximately 1,500 copies per issue, though its publication was not strictly regular throughout its lifespan¹.

- **The Scientific Press (Al-Matba'a al-Ilmiya):** Founded by Sheikh al-Uqbi in Biskra, the Scientific Press was established specifically to print his newspaper, Al-Islah (Reform), after he was unable to do so in Tunisia or Constantine. Despite its name, the press was poorly equipped. Consequently, only the second issue of the newspaper was printed there before the project faltered. It is reported that the press was purchased using loans from benefactors, including the families of Sheikh Kheireddine, Mohamed el-Aid, and Lamine Lamoudi. The second issue appeared on September 5, 1929, on the eve of Al-Uqbi's permanent move to the capital (Algiers). Sheikh al-Madani noted that the Scientific Press eventually fell victim to neglect and corruption.

- **The Maghreb al-Arabi Press (Al-Wifaq Newspaper):**

The first issue of Al-Wifaq (The Accord) was published on March 23, 1938, by Mohamed al-Said al-Zahrawi, who served as both its director and editor-in-chief. The newspaper defined itself as: "A weekly political journal dedicated to the service of Arabism and Islam, and to the implementation of the goals it has set forth.

Despite the owner's extensive efforts, the newspaper faced significant financial and technical difficulties. Initially based in Oran with its own printing house, it was forced to suspend publication for five months after its 21st issue. It resumed on February 23, 1939, changing from a weekly to a semi-monthly publication. During this period, it was printed at the "Arab Printing House" (Al-Matba'a Al-Arabiya) in the capital, where issues 22 to 26 were released over ten months. Starting December 31, 1939, the newspaper returned to Oran; however, persistent administrative and financial struggles led to its final closure on July 30, 1940, with its 37th issue.

- **Al-Basa'ir Printing House:**

In 1954, the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema purchased its own printing press, thereby ending its reliance on French printing houses. This press is considered one of the most significant projects accomplished by the Association².

In this manner, Algerians succeeded in establishing their own press—one that spoke their language, defended their ideas and interests, and communicated to the colonial authorities their rejection of arbitrary and oppressive laws. The cities of Oran, Constantine, Algiers, Biskra, and Annaba became the primary hubs for this journalistic activity.

Although these newspapers were often characterized by structural and organizational weaknesses, which resulted in numerous errors, their core orientation and the fundamental, existential issues they addressed played a vital role. They contributed significantly to the crystallization of the national cause, the dissemination of revolutionary ideas, and the preparation of public opinion to grasp issues of national significance³.

¹ Ben Mezouz Amer. (June 2022). The Algerian Al-Balagh Newspaper (1926–1948) and the Palestinian Cause. *Journal of Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1, p. 170.

² Abou el-Kacem Saadallah, op. cit., p. 312

³ National Center for Documentation, Press, Photo and Media, Communication Sector: 60 Years of Achievements, Algeria: Ministry of Communication, 2023, p. 12



- **Conclusion:**

The Algerian printing presses established during the colonial era represent a significant achievement in the trajectory of the Algerian press. They were born out of the suffering of the Algerian people and persisted in documenting the painful reality they endured, despite the constant harassment from the French colonial administration.

The emergence of these presses in Algeria provided, through their publications, an educational and awareness-building dimension regarding the issues addressed within their pages. Although some did not last long due to the French authorities' efforts to suppress them, the pioneers did not surrender. Instead, their resolve strengthened, leading them to publish under different titles while maintaining the same ideological discourse and objectives. Furthermore, these presses were not confined to a single geographic area but spanned various Algerian regions, such as Constantine, Oran, Algiers, and Biskra. Leading figures of the Algerian press were the driving forces behind these establishments, including Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis, Sheikh Tayeb el-Okbi, Sheikh Abou al-Yaqdhan, and others.

Certainly! Here is the list of references translated into English, organized alphabetically by the author's last name, with the website listed in a separate section.

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