David L. Johnston

Yale University

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Fuzzy Reformist-Islamist borders: Malek Bennabi and Rachid Ghannouchi on Civilization

The British Muslim academic Akbar S. Ahmed, who currently holds the Ibn Khaldun chair at the American University, has recently argued that in the growing tensions of the post-September 11 “war on terrorism” two intellectual camps are striving for preeminence and the future of today’s global reality to a great extent depends on who overcomes.[[1]](#footnote-1) The first camp has rallied around Samuel Huntington’s vision of a “clash of civilizations,” the most formidable of which is between the dominant global civilization of the west and that composed of Muslim nations.[[2]](#footnote-2) For him and other writers such as Francis Fukuyama[[3]](#footnote-3) and Felipe Fernandez Armesto,[[4]](#footnote-4) the current statist structure of world governance is waning and the most important players on the world scene of the future will not be nation-states, but rather civilizations. As an attempt to recontextualize Arnold Toynbee’s concept of civilizations, Huntington defines them as referring to “the overall way of life of a people, and a civilization is a culture writ large. They both involve the values, norms, institutions, and models of thinking to which successive generations in a given society have attached primary importance.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Yet when he applied this definition to the regions of Islamic self-identity, Huntington concluded that “Islam has bloody borders.”[[6]](#footnote-6) He was forced to tone down somewhat his judgment in his subsequent book. Nonetheless, the “clash of civilization” paradigm remains particularly wary of Muslim civilization, which, according to Huntington’s own essentialist definition, will always oppose the west.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Fortunately, argues Ahmed, a second paradigm is seeking to prevail, and it is the perspective of a global dialogue of civilizations promoted by a variety of actors on the global scene.[[8]](#footnote-8) At the same time, he does not dismiss the loose concept of civilization—both camps assume it to a certain extent. In fact, he takes stock of the recent resurgence in “religious revivalism” which can be observed globally “in Judaism, Christianity, in Hindu, and in Buddhist societies.”[[9]](#footnote-9) What we need then, posits Ahmed, is a re-actualizing of Ibn Khaldun’s concept of “human civilization” on today’s global scale and for various civilizations to sit at the same table, talk and listen to one another.[[10]](#footnote-10)

These contemporary concerns about civilization were in fact debated by Muslims a generation ago through the reflections and writings of a little known author, the Algerian Malek Bennabi (1905-1973). In fact, nearly all of his twenty-four books centered on this theme of civilization. This essay, then, seeks to present the thinking of Bennabi on this issue, but also in connection with a contemporary Muslim thinker who claims to have been profoundly influenced by Bennabi, both in person and through his writings. Rachid Ghannouchi (b. 1941),[[11]](#footnote-11) the Tunisian islamist writer[[12]](#footnote-12) and politician, attributes part of his appreciation for some of the norms and underpinnings of contemporary western democracy to his early contact with Bennabi. The bulk of this essay, however, concerns Bennabi, as little work is available on his thought.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The investigation into the thought of these two North-African authors will also raise questions about two crucial heuristic labels we use today about contemporary Muslim thought: reformism—the reform movement initiated by Shah Wali Allah, al-Afghanï and Muùammad ŒAbdüh that seeks to reinterpret Islam in the context of western-dominated modernity—and islamism, the term now in use for what some, in the last thirty years, have been calling “political Islam,” “Islamic fundamentalism,” or “Islamic revivalism.” Since William E. Shepard’s 1987 article on typologies of Islamic movements, not much has been added since then to refine his analysis.[[14]](#footnote-14) The differences in various other typologies, as he himself noted, are really slight modifications of what has come to be seen as a consensus. The only departure here is that I use the more general term “reformism” for the category he calls “Islamic modernism,” and the following definition will guide the present discussion. Reformism is the “tendency to emphasize the flexibility of Islam in the public sphere and to use this flexibility to interpret Islam in terms congruent with, or at least in very positive dialogue with, one or more Western ideologies.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Seen in this light, the borders between the obvious reformism of Bennabi and the self-proclaimed islamism of Ghannouchi are very fuzzy indeed. This is why John P. Entelis offers three categories in his analysis of North African Islam: religious (a bottom-up strategy of political change focusing primarily on education), reformist (direct political action along democratic pathways), and radical (aiming for a rapid transfer of power through violent means if necessary).[[16]](#footnote-16) Since this typology, however, is most concerned about political change and violence (and weak on theology), I will follow the above differentiation between reformism and islamism, while explaining how it should be understood today.

# Bennabi’s Puzzling Legacy

Throughout his life, Malek Bennabi was obsessed with the task of saving the Muslim world from its centuries-old trial of decline, and especially its more recent colonized version—an obsession he shared with all the great Islamic reformers from Sayyid Ahmad Khan to Muhammad Iqbal.[[17]](#footnote-17) At the same, he has been characterized as one of the prime influences on the Algerian islamist movement that culminated in the establishment of The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS, *Front Islamique du Salut*) and its meteoric rise in the late 1980s. Entelis, a long-time observer of Maghrebi affairs, notes that the “mainstream” political leadership of the FIS, which believes in parliamentary democracy, current realities of nation-states, and gradual implementation of Islamic law (as opposed to the more radical wing led by Ali Belhadj) finds its “intellectual inspiration” from the writings of Malek Bennabi (1905-1973).[[18]](#footnote-18) In a study of the Algerian government’s Islamic publication *al-Aßla* (1971-1981), a French scholar, Luc-Willy Deheuvels, reveals the progression by which the “fundamentalist” Bennabi, who founded the first islamist movement in Algeria (Al-Qiyam, 1963, officially banned, 1970) with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, is posthumously rehabilitated in government circles during the period of “radicalization” (1977-1981), particularly for his writing about an “Islamic commonwealth.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The islamist image of Bennabi is further reinforced by the fact that soon after Ghannouchi became the leader of a new clandestine Tunisian movement, *al-Jamﬁa al-Islmiyya*, he brought delegations in 1970, 1971 and 1972 to Bennabi’s Islamic Thought Seminars in Algiers. This is puzzling, to say the least, in light of Bennabi’s writings, which seem to place him on the secular end of Islamic reformism. To this puzzle we now turn, first with some biographical details on Malek Bennabi, and then with an analysis of his writings.

## Biographical Sketch

Born in Constantine, Algeria, in 1905, he first attented a qur’anic school, but then his parents decided to enroll him in a French school, in which one particular teacher took a special interest in him. Perhaps this was the catalyst that propelled him on a life-long pursuit of learning—mostly outside of the classroom. As the First World War unfolded, he quickly became absorbed in reading, pitting his hopes on the Ottoman entry into the war on the side of the Axis. At the same time, he watched with dismay the Algerians who, drafted by the colonial power, marched off to war. Soon, however, his hopes were dashed as the Turks’ military machine crumbled, along with their Axis allies.

After completing elementary school with excellent grades, he was sent to Constantine on a scholarship in order to enter the Médersa[[20]](#footnote-20)—a school which trains Muslim lawyers and functionaries for employment in the Muslim courts. According to his autobiography, his greatest pleasure was to read on his own. Already in his first year two books in particular sowed fertile seeds in his mind: *Faillite morale de la politique occidentale en Orient* by a Turkish author, Ahmed Riza, and Mu˛ammad ﬁAbdüh’s *Rislat al-Taw˛ıd* (which he read in French). [[21]](#footnote-21)

A kind of revelation (“*coup de foudre,*” lit. “lightning bolt”) came in his second year. Though Islam remained the guiding star of his spiritual compass and “the flame that burned in his soul,” one day he happened to read a copy of the French paper of Constantine, and by the same token he found out about the British decision to exile the Wafdist leader Zaghloul Pasha to Egypt. In a matter of minutes, as he sat meditating on the article he had just read, a new feeling flooded his soul: he knew for the first time that he was a nationalist.[[22]](#footnote-22) He began to devour all sorts of newspapers from then on, with the communist paper *L’Humanité* becoming his favorite, because of its internationalist, anti-colonial stand. His attention turned more and more to political issues, with a growing sense of belonging to all of humanity, in its many shades. Already widely read in French and Arabic literature, he now added an anti-colonial writer who plants in him the longing for a wider experience of the world—the Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore.[[23]](#footnote-23)

One last influence from this period came from the conversations he had with his friends as they often watched the reformist leader, Shaykh Ben Badis (1889-1940), walk past their café on the way to his office. He had been educated in the prestigious Islamic Zaytüna center in Tunis, under the influence of eager reformist, or *salafı*, professors.[[24]](#footnote-24) Bennabi called him the “patriotic *ﬁlim*” at the time—this was just a few years before he actually founded the Association of Algerian Muslim *ﬁUlam√* (AUMA, 1931), very much in the spirit of Mu˛ammad ﬁAbdüh and Rashıd Ri∂. The *ißl˛* (reform) movement was gaining in Algeria at the time, and Ben Badis was already in the forefront.[[25]](#footnote-25) Three years after his graduation, in 1928, he came through Constantine and visited Ben Badis for the first time.[[26]](#footnote-26)

As he recounted this visit to Constantine after three years of absence, he remembered being stunned by the intensity of the “*ißl˛* fever” in the entire region. [[27]](#footnote-27) No doubt this fact contributed to the anticipation with which he entered Ben Badis’ office. Yet because he came back changed in his appearance (Bennabi, the “rebel, “was now wearing western style pants, glasses, and nothing on his head”), the moment turned out awkward. He remained standing as he spoke to the Shaykh about several matters, and especially about the urgent need to exploit farm lands. Ben Badis listened politely, but did not respond, or even engage him in any way. Bennabi left disappointed.[[28]](#footnote-28) Though he remained sympathetic throughout to the *salafı/ißl˛ı* reformist agenda, he consistently endorsed a more nationalist and pragmatic reinterpretation of Islam for the good of the Algerian nation, first as a colonized people militating for independence, and later on as a new nation that must learn to shake off its old self-imposed shackles.

With his father’s encouragement Bennabi traveled to France in 1930 and finished his formal studies with a degree in electrical engineering in 1935.[[29]](#footnote-29) The following year he and several of his friends met with the Algerian delegation of the Muslim Congress (with Ben Badis among them) who had come to Paris to lobby for political reforms in Algeria. Yet, while staying in touch with political circles, he devoted more of his energies to social issues. Allan Christelow, in the only substantial article on Bennabi in English, adds an important detail at this point: “In his early student days in Paris, he joined a Catholic student social club, and made a number of close friends there.”[[30]](#footnote-30) These encounters allowed Bennabi to interact with Christians outside of the colonial reality. Christelow points to the ecumenical side of Bennabi’s personality and vision to which these experiences no doubt added support. “For Bennabi,” he notes, “dialogue between Islam and other civilizations was possible, indeed highly desirable, but such dialogue could not take place within an asymmetrical colonial framework.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

He also begins to write—all in French, at least while he is still living in France. His first book is published in 1946, *The Qur’anic Phenomenon*, an apologetic work seeking to defend the divine origin of the Qur’an.[[32]](#footnote-32) Then appears his one and only novel, Lebeik (1947), and then his seminal work on civilization, *Les Conditions de la Renaissance* (The Conditions for Renewal, 1948). In fact, he later published all his works under the title “Problems of Civilization.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

Two years after the war of liberation got underway (1956), Bennabi moved to Egypt where he stayed until 1963, just a year after Algerian independence. While in Egypt, he obtained from the president Jamal Abd al-Nasser a monthly salary which enabled him to spend his time writing and speaking in various venues. Egypt is also where Bennabi truly learned Arabic and began writing books and lecturing in Arabic.[[34]](#footnote-34) During this time he remained in close contact with the leaders of the National Liberation Front (FLN) of Algeria who, on several occasions, entrusted him with several diplomatic missions in neighboring countries.[[35]](#footnote-35) Most likely in conjunction with these missions, Bennabi repeatedly gave public lectures in Lebanon and Syria. His book *Ta√ammult* (“Meditations”), first published in Damascus in 1961, under the name of a lawyer, ﬁUmar Musqwı, from Tripoli, Lebanon, is a collection of such lectures given in universities and government-sponsored clubs. This Lebanese editor presented Bennabi as “a Muslim writer, who chooses Islam as a way of expressing our renaissance (*nah∂atuna*) and our culture as we expect it to develop.” In the face of western civilization, he adds, modern Muslim thought “has surrendered to its realities without participating in them.” Bennabi’s contribution is profoundly ecumenical in its analysis, he argues:

Furthermore, the writer has widened the analytical scope of his lectures and multiplied examples in his desire to define the natural shape of the present civilization’s experiments, which are the result of a common project in this particular stage of humankind’s development.

Thus professor Malek has laid out the essential rules for the effectiveness of the human will and power invested for the construction of civilization.[[36]](#footnote-36)

This is precisely the impression Bennabi’s writing leaves with me: he is a Muslim concerned that the Islamic world not borrow the artifacts of western civilization in a blind or naïve fashion, but rather critically on that basis, in order to offer its own contribution, according to its own values and cultural resources, to the edification of human civilization in the second half of the twentieth century.

Bennabi’s loyal service to the Algerian revolution was rewarded as he came home (after more than thirty years of exile), and he is given the post of Director of Higher Education, which he keeps until he resigns in 1967. The official biography adds that he resigned “in order to devote himself to intellectual labor, to the reformation and organization of intellectual gatherings which later became the Seminars of Islamic Thought which Algeria organizes on a yearly basis.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Not surprisingly, an important episode that the biographical dictionary chose to omit is the great influence Bennabi exerted in the founding and running of Algeria’s first islamist organization, Al-Qiyam (“Values”), in 1963. Here it must be stated that Ben Badis’ AUMA, through its “linking of reform and education with the promotion of Algerian nationalism,” “laid the foundations for the national identity of the Algerian people.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Ben Badis had defined the three components of this national identity as Islam, Arabism and nationalism—a slogan that his successor, Shaykh al-Bashir al-Ibrahimi, continued to adopt—and this stance was taken up as well by the Algerian leadership all through the war of independence (1954-1962).[[39]](#footnote-39)

## Bennabi’s Influence on a Whole Generation of Islamists

After independence, as the Leninist stance of the ruling elite behind president Ben Bella became evident, Shaykh al-Ibrahimi warned the new leaders that Algeria was losing its soul and that instead, Islam must be the main source of the state’s ideology. The AUMA was immediately dissolved, to the shock of the *ulamas* who had militated in the national struggle from the beginning, and with great popular support. This was the context of the founding of Al-Qiyam the next year. The leader of the new movement, al-Hachemi Tidjani, was also the secretary-general of the University of Algiers, a close friend of Bennabi.[[40]](#footnote-40) Among the founders were other leading religious figures who had contacts with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, but the movement’s ethos was largely found in the pages of its French journal, *Humanisme Musulman*, edited by Bennabi himself.

In reality, Al-Qiyam held within it the two divergent Islamic tendencies that would later resurface in the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the late 1980s. The first current was led by Bennabi himself, inheriting some of the reformist ideas of the AUMA but adding to it a stronger nationalist, pragmatic and bilingual character. In fact, Bennabi was the catalyst for a whole stream of intellectuals calling for specific Islamic solutions for the sociopolitical and economic needs of Algeria—the *Tayr al-Jaz√ra* (the Algerianization Trend).[[41]](#footnote-41) In fact, this is the current Shahin associates with Al-Qiyam as a whole:

Al-Qiyam focused on the sociological and cultural dimensions of post-independence Algeria. The issue of decolonization and the reconstruction of the national components of the Algerian identity were recurring themes. It devoted several of its articles to the question of Arabization, Islamic and national education, decolonization, and the cultural and sociological aspects of independence.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Yet this was only one side of a movement that gathered under its wings the majority of Islamic leaders who were seeking to register their discontent with the state’s secular policies. Deheuvel, however, wrongly associates the more militant wing of islamists with connections to the Muslim Brotherhood with Bennabi.[[43]](#footnote-43) Besides its president Tidjani, one could find among Al-Qiyam’s membership the Shaykh Mahfoudh Nahnah (who in the mid-1960s founded his own influential *Jamﬁa al-Irshd wa’l-Ißl˛*, Group of Guidance and Reform, later called Hamas), the prominent Shaykhs Abdel Latif Sultani and Ahmed Sahnoun, the young Abbasi Madani (the more moderate founder of the FIS) and others who later became leaders in various islamist organizations.[[44]](#footnote-44) Partly because of its political success (particularly with regard to the establishment of religious education in the schools), partly because of acts of violence attributed to some of its followers,[[45]](#footnote-45) and partly because of a letter sent to President Nasser of Egypt pleading for Sayyid Qutb’s amnesty, Al-Qiyam saw its activities seriously curtailed in 1966 and its organization dissolved in 1970.

It follows from the above sketch of Bennabi’s influence on the Algerian Islamic movements that he was the main inspiration for the more home-grown, “Algerianist” trend, more concerned with the practical ways of developing their country’s economy and cultural vibrancy than with a strict application of classical *sharıﬁa* law.[[46]](#footnote-46) More specifically, Shahin summarizes Bennabi’s influence through the evaluation of one of his students, Abdel Latif Abada, a university professor. In Abada’s estimation, three distinct though interconnected and overlapping movements came out of his weekly meetings:

1. An informal circle of thinkers concerned with the theoretical and practical modalities of social change.
2. Intellectuals and activists seeking to simplify the tenets of traditional Islam and to disseminate this more contextualized version of Islam to the Algerian population at large.
3. A student movement which Bennabi helped to establish during his tenure at the University of Algiers (later known as the Student Mosque group), and which injected life and energy into the Algerian islamist movement of the 1980s.

Nour-Eddine Boukrouh, a representative of the first group, followed Bennabi closely from 1968 to his death. He himself set out to edit Bennabi’s works, of which the first product was *Les Grands Thèmes* (The Great Themes).[[47]](#footnote-47) This did not hinder him from applying Bennabi’s principles in politics, for in 1989 he founded the Party for Algerian Renaissance (PRA) and sits on the cabinet of the present government. In his preface he highlights the aspect of Bennabi’s work that is increasingly singled out—his humanist vision on a global scale:

My generation must come to grips with the fact that it knows little about the only thinker on a global scale whose birth our Algerian land has witnessed.

Those who have devoted themselves, Algerians or even foreigners, to the kind of research capable of creating Algerian Thought, can no longer ignore Malek Bennabi.

. . . We would not be careless in any way, considering the present circumstances, if we were to grant him the place he deserves next to Ibn Khaldun, Herder, Burckhardt, Spengler, Toynbee and other thinkers and philosophers of existence.

. . . For it is in connection with the world’s meaning that one brings up Bennabi, the art of building a nation from our historical future, and from humanity itself at the end of this century.[[48]](#footnote-48)

The next three sections seek to illustrate both the first and second currents, cited by Abada, on the central theme of Bennabi’s work—human civilization. For this purpose I will be using three of his books in French, and one in Arabic (already mentioned, *Ta√ammult*), a collection of his lectures in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon in the late fifties and early sixties. The first work, *Vocation de l’Islam*,[[49]](#footnote-49) was a widening of the themes of his book, *Les Conditions de la Renaissance*, published the previous year. It was also an occasion to reflect on the founding of the State of Israel and the resulting dispossession of the Palestinians. The second work referred to here is Bennabi’s *Le problème des idées dans le monde musulman* (The Problem of Ideas in the Muslim World), first published in 1970.[[50]](#footnote-50) It is no doubt his most mature work on the idea of civilization.

## Definitions and Parameters

In a lecture delivered in Algiers in the early 1950s, Bennabi asks, “What is civilization?” The classic anthropological definition, “any organizational form of human life,” will have to be narrowed down, he asserts.[[51]](#footnote-51) The “form of life” inherited, for instance, by the Algerian people in the era of colonialism cannot be called a “civilization.” The point of the essay is not to discover some new truth but to discover an effective research tool which would also produce tangible results in practice—“a form of life in which every Algerian person could find every necessary motivation and the guaranties necessary to his existence.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Sociological work done since WWII reveals the socioeconomic conditions of a number of nations like Algeria under the label of “underdevelopment.” Here is an acceptable heuristic device, writes Bennabi, at least as a starting point. On the surface—but this is very important in itself—underdevelopment is an economic problem: for instance, for the year 1955 the per capita income of the USA was $1,835, while for Liberia or Indonesia it was $38. Additional quantifiable indices of underdevelopment are high unemployment rates, high illiteracy rates, under-nourishment, etc. The threshold of development might be Japan’s figure of $200 per capita income. Remarkably, when we look at the distribution of underdevelopment around the world we notice that it is largely concentrated in the southern hemisphere.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Development, then, for the under-developed nations of Africa and Asia appears to be the process of industrialization, a task Japan has admirably mastered. But it would be naïve to think it were only a matter of applying techniques of production and economic planning—or to say that Europe started to develop with the invention of the steam engine. A certain number of crucial sociological and social conditions came into being before that time, which created an atmosphere that facilitated such discoveries and their rational application in industrialized form. Development as we know it today, in its historical genesis, is a western phenonemon. For about four centuries is can be located within an area (*une aire*) in continual expansion since Christopher Columbus.[[54]](#footnote-54) Economic development is only a certain phase of this general civilizational development – only its material manifestation. The steam engine or the printing press are mere artifacts, products of this western civilization, which is “the real motor (*matrice*) behind all the details of the moral and social development of the person belonging to this area.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

The dynamic nature of a civilization is reflected in its capacity (*pouvoir*) and will (*vouloir*), turned inward, and thus benefiting each member of its society. But it must also be turned outward, particularly as we see it manifested in western civilization, which not only radiated its cultural and economic achievements, but also exported its expansionistic policies (colonialism). Here is Bennabi’s formal definition—a functional one rather than anthropological one: “[Civilization] is the totality of moral and material conditions that allow a society to grant each of its members, in each phase of their existence from childhood to old age, the assistance necessary for them in this phase of their [societal] development.”[[56]](#footnote-56) This naturally includes institutions like the school, the workshop, the hospital, security in all its forms, and the respect of the human person expressed in a variety of ways. The will to provide is there from the start, but the capacity to deliver this assistance only begins as a potential capacity (*une virtualité*). This also means that it is a civilization which produces all its artifacts—and not the other way around. Bennabi quips, “Avicenna was only a virtuality in a chromosome. It was the general circumstances of the Muslim society of his time that realized this potential.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Before the steam engine, before Leonardo de Vinci, before even Thomas Aquinas, an historical process was creating the potential for all the moments of future thought and action in this western society.

Muslim society initiated a renaissance movement about a century ago. It was sparked by al-Afghani’s meditation upon and reaction to the 1858 revolt of one of India’s ethnic groups. But as he explains more fully in *Vocation de l’Islam*, this movement never translated practically into social transformation.[[58]](#footnote-58) He cites the Turk Ahmed Rida and Chakib Arsalan who authored “books of defense and justifications, and not works of edification or guidance.”[[59]](#footnote-59) The Algerian *Ißl˛* too never went beyond a polemic against “maraboutism” and colonialism. It was as if Marx and Engels wrote a critique of capitalist society and stopped short of offering an alternative.

The great mistake of Muslim thinking for the last half of century is that it concentrates on the products of civilization while ignoring the capacity and will, which are the foundation of civilization. Instead of seeking to build a civilization, Muslim thought has fallen into an obsession about things (*choséisme*), and the way to more heartily pile them up (*entassement*). Instead of building, it has only accumulated building materials.[[60]](#footnote-60) Construction did begin in 1952 in Egypt and 1954 in Algeria. But this never resulted in a new edifice, but rather proved to be an empty exercise of piling up things one on top of the other (*entassement*). Piling up people as well: in order to reduce unemployment one multiplies the number of government employees, thus adding to the problem of waste and ineffectiveness. In the end, the Muslim renewal movement faltered, not by lack of means, but by lack of ideas.[[61]](#footnote-61)

**Time**

Progression of science and technology over time, level of productivity

**Soil**

Natural resources, sociopolitical climate,

legal infrastructure

**People**

the essential factor

dkfdndkdfsdfs

## Civilization

**FIGURE 1: Bennabi’s Ingredients of Civilization**

How does one build (*faire*) a civilization? That is the central issue, and Bennabi analyzes it as the scientist he was trained to be: the best way to study this question is by the laboratory study of a sample. Take the light bulb. Like any other product of civilization its sociological substance can be reduced to three factors: soil (natural resources), time (the more planned the work, the faster it is accomplished, and the faster civilization develops), and the human person (cf. Figure 1). First, the soil: it is the matter used to manufacture the light bulb and the wires to conduct and isolate electricity. Then the factor of time: from the discovery of electricity in the eighteenth century to its application in lighting in the nineteenth century. Finally, the human person: all those who, on the idea or the manufacturing ends, made it possible (from Galvani to Edison). Thus the light bulb is a product of man, time and soil. Hence this definition: “the sum of the products of civilization is equal to the number of people (*l’ensemble des personnes*), the extension of the soil and the amount of time involved in the process of their elaboration.”[[62]](#footnote-62) In a sense, the sum of the products is the civilization itself, but only arranged randomly side by side, without noting their inner connections. The aggregate of persons refers to “man” as a social being. The extension of the soil is the land with all of its sociological conditioning (legal status and technical management). Finally, the sum of elapsed time is “socialized time,” as it finds expression in all the industrial, economic and cultural operations, and as a support to these processes. A civilization produces its own synthesis of these three factors through its own unique capacity and will.

Toynbee saw civilization as a response to dramatic challenges: drought, flooding, invasions, wars, etc. . . [[63]](#footnote-63) But this doesn’t explain why, remarks Bennabi, as the desert expanded in North Africa at the beginning of human settlement, people actually scattered in different directions (some to the Nile Valley, others to the Delta); and why one part decided to stay and adapt to the new conditions (the Tuaregs, for example). Nor will explanations based on climate and political events explain why the Hebrews undertook their Exodus from Egypt. There was an eschatological reality, a metaphysical one, that drove Moses and his people forward. The great civilizations of the world (including Buddhist, Hindu, Mosaic) that still exist today “formed their original synthesis of man, soil and time, in the cradle of a religious idea.”[[64]](#footnote-64) The USSR is no exception—its inspiration is still related to Christianity and Judaism, if only as a reaction against them.

It would be wrong to say that religion has to be a founding element of civilization; and yet, religion plays a larger role than most would admit, Bennabi contends. Though western civilization emerged at the double impulse of French rationalism and Italian aestheticism, it never lost sight of its Christian origins. From the beginning, the Renaissance kept alive and accelerated its Christian centrifugal movement. The modern Islamic renewal movement, however, is centripetal. Islam, it is true, does figure in the Algerian National Charter as the third pillar of the nation, but Algeria has a long way to go in order to convert the words into the reality of a dynamic civilization.

**FIGURE 2: The Three Poles of Civilization—Also its Three Stages**

Human action, then, is the key to civilization and it centers around three poles: things, people and ideas (cf. Figure 2). The social, economic and political ramifications of an action are characterized by the unique combination of these three poles or factors. Further, each culture patterns its collective action according to common norms and so that the individual takes on a particular role in the division of labor mapped out by society as a whole. Children pass through these various poles, or worlds, as they move toward maturity. They begin with the discovery of the universe of things. Only progressively does the child differentiate between faces, and thus the idea of a person’s identity appears—self-identity and the identity of family members (with the mother first). More traumatically, children dive into the world of interpersonal relationships as they are sent to school. Introverts struggle naturally more than extraverts, but it is the former who are more likely to be the first to discover the third universe, that of ideas. This is likely to happen when a child reflects on a problem and comes to its solution by him- or herself. It is what Bennabi calls the “Archimedes moment,” the “Eureka!” of discovery. This is the phenomenon he was able to witness in the faces of the Algerian illiterate workers he taught to read for nine months in France.[[65]](#footnote-65) Civilizations also move through these various stages, but they can only be born through the impact of an idea—an idea that is often religious.

Societies, or civilizations at their infancy, burst onto the scene of history with their original idea now freshly configuring new patterns of people and things. In Medina, the prototype of Islamic society was the synergy provided by the collaboration of *anßår* and *muhåjir¥n*. Here is his description:

Suddenly, an idea illuminated a cave, Ghar Hira, where a solitary man was meditating. Its radiance brought forth a message which started with the word, “Read!”

This word tore through the darkness of the *jahiliyya* and destroyed the solitude of *jahili* society. A new society saw the light, now in communication with the world and with history. It began to destroy the tribal borders in its midst in order to found its new world of persons, in which each one is to become the bearer of its message, a new cultural universe where things center on ideas.[[66]](#footnote-66)

Thus we have the growth in maturity of an individual, thereby offering a parallel with the maturation process of a particular society:

1. The age of the thing: a pre-civilized society
2. The age of the person: a society moving toward civilization
3. The age of the idea: a civilized society

A society, then, just as the individual, must find a way to meet its vital needs. This requires the expenditure of vital energy. But here we find two opposing dangers. If this vital energy is suppressed (by an oppressive dictatorship or the like), society is destroyed. But if it is released without any limits or conditioning, society is also destroyed. Civilization grows through the wise limits imposed on a particular society in harmony with its original archetypes, or founding ideas: “In fact, at the origin of every civilization is this same process of integration of its vital energy, which then repeats itself according to the conditions that align this vital energy with its historical function.”[[67]](#footnote-67) These conditions of integration will vary according to the stage of a particular civilization, and of course, between civilizations. Hence, the health of a particular civilization will depend on its adaptation to its social and cultural milieu, as well as its ability to find a balance between the world of ideas and the world of things. This too represents a necessary tension, but which can easily lead to decline when the balance is lost in favor of things.

## Diagnosis and Pathology of Civilizations

In the course of presenting Bennabi’s thoughts on civilization it has been difficult, admittedly, to avoid the mention of growth, maturation, and decline. A civilization is, after all, a dynamic reality, constantly evolving. Yet, as he follows Ibn Khaldun and takes his analysis several steps further, Bennabi is concerned more than anything with finding useful tools of diagnosis. What are the marks of decline in a civilization? What are the causes for this decline? When civilizations die out—Bennabi assures us that they do—might there be remedies which these moribund societies can follow in order to rejuvenate and blossom once more?

In his *Vocation de l’Islam*, Bennabi tells us that Ibn Khaldun was indeed the first to hypothesize the notion of historical cycle through his theory of the three generations—dynasties last, in his estimation, about a hundred years. To be sure, his determining factor of *>aßåbiyya* (group cohesiveness) is a little narrow and undoubtedly conditioned by his Arab cultural milieu, yet he rightly emphasized the transitory character of human civilization. He demonstrated that civilization consists of “a succession of organic phenomena, each one of which has a beginning and end in a determinate location.”[[68]](#footnote-68) This allows him to study not only conditions of progressive development, but more importantly, the factors causing regression and decadence. Civilization has its own forces of inertia. Yet in spite of the unique material, social, political, intellectual and economic forces which impinge on a given civilization, none of these factors, individually or in combination, produce a deterministic outcome. Like an individual, a society can choose to respond to these challenges in a number of ways. Yet even in the best cases—and here he sounds very Khaldunian—decadence will always take its toll, sooner or later.

In his writings, Bennabi seems to favor two cases studies of decadence above all other possible ones. No doubt they are the ones he knows best from personal experience: the Islamic world and the western world. That last phrase, however, is misleading. For Bennabi, only the general outlines of western culture can be called a “civilization” at this stage. At the same time, the diagnosis of ills on both sides holds the key for the project to which Bennabi has committed his whole life: a renaissance of Islamic civilization.

Sadly, what was once admired the world over as the Islamic civilization slowly passed away after the Berber Almohads gave up their rule in Morocco and Spain in the late thirteenth century. What is left is a disparate patchwork of mostly reactive cultural slogans and societies that now find themselves on the underside of twentieth century economic and scientific development. The archetypes, or original and founding ideas of any civilization, have long been jettisoned, sacrificed to the expediency of political elites intent on reaping the personal benefits of power—glory, wealth and influence. Archetypes are like metallic molds. Ideas should conform to this mold, but with time the mold wears out and the ideas of a society change accordingly. But beware, warns Bennabi: ideas that are betrayed come back to haunt and wreak terrible vengeance on those who betrayed them. This is when societies, civilizations and empires come crashing down.

Bennabi distinguishes three levels of ideas: a) the ethical level: including ideological and political ideas in relation to the world of persons; b) the logical level: including scientific and philosophical ideas relating to the world of ideas; c) the technical level: economic, technological and sociological tools related to the world of things.[[69]](#footnote-69)

The “universe of ideas” (worldview) is like a phonograph record that comes with the individual at birth. Certain fundamental notes and harmonics vary from one society to the next, and it is these Bennabi calls the Archetypes. Thus, “the Greek genius molded itself onto the fundamental notes of Homer, Euclid, Pythagoras, Socrates, and Empedocles, and onto the harmonics of Plato and Aristotle—enriched by Athenian generations—in order to give to world this melody of which we still have remnants in our contemporary civilization.”[[70]](#footnote-70) Hence Arabia experienced its “moment of Archimedes” through the qur’anic message, creating a whole new way of thinking. With the passage of time, however, this ethos faded, giving way to a whole new way of life. Society now revolves around new poles.

Some of the Islamic archetypes—novel ways of polarizing a society’s vital energies—can be illustrated as follows: a man kissed a woman and their vital energy was bound to spill over beyond the new limits. The prophet advised him to pray more often during the day. A woman confessed the sin of adultery. A period of waiting was initiated because she was pregnant. She then nurses the child that is born, and when he is weaned, she is stoned.[[71]](#footnote-71) It was the sentence she had been calling for, remarks Bennabi. Finally, three men who refused to join the expedition to Tabuk are forgiven by the prophet in a passage of the Qur’an. But with time those archetypes were erased, or distorted beyond recognition. “A society that has reached this point disintegrates, for a lack of common motivation, as is the case in Algeria today after the revolution. The individual either commits suicide or gives full sway to the ego, as in Europe today. It is the era of dead ideas.”[[72]](#footnote-72)

Every society as it evolves in time faces new challenges, and thus the danger of losing its balance. “Muslim society had already reached, several centuries ago, the end of its civilization. Once more, she now finds herself at the stage of pre-civilization.” The orientalists and their Muslim ilk blame Islam. That accusation has no substance—what about the magnificient civilization of the past? Most Muslims blame colonialism today, but what about Yemen—it was never touched by the west and yet it is the most backward of all Muslim countries. Sadly, the much trumpeted Islamic “renaissance” of the late 19th century was given no plan and no system capable of evaluating its own progress. The result has been much incoherence, wasted energy and the tyranny of idols, whether men or things.[[73]](#footnote-73)

No doubt the best description of Muslim society’s historical decline and present pathology comes again from Bennabi’s *Vocation de l’Islam*, under the theme of “Post-Almohadian society.” Echoing much of the *salafiyya* mindset of his youth, Bennabi writes that the Muslim world experienced its first break in 37 H. in the Battle of Siffin, the result of which was Mu‘awiya’s rupture of the delicate Islamic balance between the spiritual and the temporal. Islamic civilization did flourish culturally in Damascus and Baghdad for several centuries thereafter, but the seeds of self-destruction had already been sown. It was actually a progressive degradation of the qur’anic spirit “built upon the balance of spirit and reason, upon the double foundation of ethics and technology, which is essential for every lasting social edifice.”[[74]](#footnote-74) Three Muslim figures in particular exemplify the qur’anic spirit:

1. The Fatimid general Okba, who, as he was bidding farewell to his children on his way to conquer North Africa, said, “O God, call forth my soul!”
2. The caliph Umar b. Abdelaziz who was ready to give up his power in the place of one of Ali’s descendants.
3. Malik b. Anas who chose to be whipped on the public square of Medina rather than to give in to the oppressive regime that was pressuring him to give up his beliefs.

Significantly, Bennabi never writes about *sharıﬁa*. In fact he totally sidesteps the classical formulations of Islamic law (according to the various schools) and speaks only of the “qur’anic spirit.” These are the values, he argues, that reflect the qur’anic virtues with which true Muslims should adorn themselves. Muhammad himself lay great stress on the moral virtues that form the bulwark of civilizations. A civilization can coast (or even expand for a while) on the basis of technology, science and reason, but without the strength of moral character (*“l’âme seule permet à l’humanité de s’élever”*),[[75]](#footnote-75) it will go downhill, lose its ascending force, “drawn by an irresistible force of gravity.” Here is Bennabi’s diagnosis:

When a society reaches this stage in its evolution, when the breath that gave it its first impulse ceases to animate it, the cycle comes to an end and that civilization makes its exodus to another arena (*aire*), where a new cycle begins, feeding on a new bio-historical synthesis. But in the arena that is vacated, the work of science loses all meaning. Whenever the outward radiance of the spirit ceases, rational work also ceases; it is as if the human person loses his or her thirst for understanding and the will to act—as soon as that momentum is lost, the “tension of faith.” Reason disappears because its products perish in a milieu which can no longer understand or use them. Thus Ibn Khaldun’s work seemed to come too soon, or too late: it could no longer imprint itself on the Muslim genius which had already lost its own plasticity, its ability to progress, to renew itself. The qur’anic impulse progressively lost its momentum, and the Muslim world stopped like an engine that has consumed its last liter of gasoline.[[76]](#footnote-76)

For Bennabi, none of the attempts at parroting the products of Islamic civilization in the subsequent course of Muslim history were able to breathe into it the energy only faith can produce—neither the Timurid revival in Samarkand, nor the Ottoman project, nor anything else could save the Muslim world from its inevitable descent. Its term was fixed: “the dislocation of a world and the appearing of a new society with new characteristics and tendencies.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Humanity, soil and time were no longer the engines of civilization, but rather listless data no longer capable of creative interaction.[[78]](#footnote-78) He then offers us another very original assessment of the role of religion in building civilization:

The social role of religion is none other than a catalyst acting for the transformation of values that pass from their natural state to a psycho-temporal state, and thereby indicating a particular stage of civilization. This transformation turns the biological individual into a sociological entity; and time as simple clocked duration evaluated in “passing hours” becomes sociological time evaluated in work-hours; the soil which furnishes complete and unconditional nourishment to people is turned to a technically equipped and conditioned terrain, apt to provide for the multiple needs of social life, according to the modalities of a particular production process.[[79]](#footnote-79)

Put otherwise, faith as it is born in a society possesses a dynamism that pushes outward and expresses itself in the collective thinking of a society. “From the moment a faith becomes centripetal, without outward radiance, that is, individualistic, its mission on earth is finished, and it is no longer able to promote a civilization. It only produces a bigoted faith, that pulls back from life, the faith of those who run away from their duties and responsibilities, like those who, since the time of Ibn Khaldun, have taken refuge in maraboutism.[[80]](#footnote-80) The complete (*intégral*) man accomplishes in society a double mission, that of “actor and witness.” But the course of history may contribute to this person’s dislocation, losing both his or her moral and material foundation.

This is the trajectory of what Bennabi calls the “Post-Almodadian man.” From Kairouan to Samarkand, around 1369, Muslim values began to be turned on their head and Muslim civilization began its downward curve. No doubt, it carried within its womb the rupture at Siffin where a democratic caliphal power gave way to dynasty. It had produced remarkable artifacts and cultural achievements, yet inevitably the time comes when those in power are no longer able to adapt the institutions to changing conditions. The failure is no longer in politics, but rather in the people themselves. Civilized persons lose their civilizing drive and become incapable of applying their civilizational genius to their soil and time. With the fall of the Almohad dynasty the whole Muslim civilization began to crumble, form east to west.

Just as individuals pass on their heredity to their descendants so the dominant traits and propensities of a people are passed down to future generation; thus, post-Almohadian man still lives within the borders and in the heart of Muslims today. This also explains for Bennabi why the recent attempts at renaissance have fallen short of expectations. Past character-types of Muslim history still haunt current generations, whether the *fellah* on his farm, the city merchant, or the suave millionaire with a bachelor’s degree. “And as long as our society has not liquidated this weight from the past inherited from the failure that occurred six centuries ago, and as long as it has not renewed man in conformity with the true Islamic tradition and the Cartesian experience, it will seek in vain the necessary equilibrium for a new synthesis of its history.”[[81]](#footnote-81)

It follows that the quintessential mark of the post-Almohadian man is his colonizability (*colonisabilité*). He is “the typical face of the colonial era, the clown to whom the colonizer gives the role of ‘native’ and who can accept to play all the roles, even that of ‘emperor’, if that is what the situation requires.”[[82]](#footnote-82) No doubt with the word Bennabi coined, “colonizability,” we have come to the root of his thinking. Bennabi is no *ﬁlim*,[[83]](#footnote-83) no university-trained philosopher or sociologist,[[84]](#footnote-84) yet from his early youth he never stopped reading and learning at the feet of authors and scholars from around the world. He was certainly passionate about his Muslim faith and zealous to promote, in the vein of al-Afghani before him, his version of Pan-Islamism in the face of the western colonial enterprise. But as the next section shows, his vision was also broader—both with regard to Islamic renaissance, and the future of human civilization globally.

## Colonizability and the Dialogue of Civilizations

Bennabi was one of the few Muslim writers after WWII who actually read a handful of western scholars of Islam and engaged their thought constructively. Malcolm H. Kerr, commenting on the project of Islamic reformism (largely founded by Mu˛ammad ﬁAbdüh), echoed the opinion of many others when he wrote, “The evolution of Islamic modernism from a program of radical reform to a set of vague ideological attitudes has been due in large measure to the apologetic mentality among Muslims vis-à-vis Western Civilization.”[[85]](#footnote-85) This is precisely the nature of Bennabi’s protest regarding what he termed “the reform movement.” Agreeing with H. A. R. Gibb in his *Modern Trends in Islam*, Bennabi laments the institutional limitations from which the reform establishment suffered, and the inertia which, in the end, signaled its demise. The three main characteristics of these dead ideas were atomism (the inability to synthesize), dogmatism, and an apologetic spirit.[[86]](#footnote-86)

The other main Muslim current, the “modernist” current, which grew out of the curriculum of the colonial schools and the Muslim elites’ experience of study abroad, only digested the surface phenomena of a foreign civilization. The student abroad, therefore, has not experienced western civilization, notes Bennabi, but only read it. He has learned, but not understood. This keeps him ignorant of his own civilization, which has for a long time ceased to be a civilization, for it has been transformed by colonialism and racism into “a culture of empire.”[[87]](#footnote-87) European artifacts must be studied within their own cultural context and then they must be carefully examined as to their potential rootedness in Muslim culture. The products of civilization—the airplane or the bank—find their genesis in the virtues incarnated in the craftsmen, artists, scientists, and simple workers of a civilization.

Before Muslims can achieve their necessary reformation and therefore join the wider human civilization of the twentieth century as full-scale participants, they must take stock of three particularly dangerous symptoms of paralysis that afflict them:

1. Moral paralysis (by far the worst) finds its roots in this fallacious syllogism: “Islam is a perfect religion, we are Muslims, therefore we are perfect.” All over the Muslim world, scores of abuses and sins are glossed over amidst a superficial practice of Islam’s outward rites. Regrettably, one sees little soul-searching, and few if any who as leaders are ready to confess their faults in public or private.[[88]](#footnote-88)
2. Social paralysis: truth is not enough; it must be acting truth that changes society. Individuals who are self-satisfied block any social progress. No wonder both Renan and Lammenais denounced this paralysis by calling Islam “a religion of stagnation and regression.”[[89]](#footnote-89)
3. Moral paralysis leads to intellectual paralysis, and when people reflect, they stop short of the potential social impact of their thought. ﬁAbdüh’s reform basically stayed on the level of literature and theology, still in the throes of a stifling traditionalism.[[90]](#footnote-90) On the reformist side there was a breath of fresh air in the writings of Taha Hussein, but nor he nor those who followed him endeavored to propose a coherent plan of action for renewal.

Action, as Bennabi never ceases to repeat, must grow out of thought. Thus it can fail easily on two counts—actually, two psychoses: the “easy thing” (like the Palestine fiasco due to a lack of lucid and concerted action on the part of the Arabs) and the “impossible thing,” as he has often noted concerning Algeria. This second psychosis, which he exposed in his book, *The Conditions of the Algerian Renaissance,* comes in three forms, three myths:

1. *We cannot do anything because we are ignorant*. Of course we are ignorant, but why are those educated elites doing nothing to further the cause of literacy among the masses? Is this not what the Jewish leaders did under German occupation? We have even more freedom than they did. But then we multiply schools without doing anything to improve the education: “*En multipliant la nullité, on n’obtiendra jamais autre chose que la nullité*.”[[91]](#footnote-91)
2. *We cannot accomplish that because we are poor*. There are plenty of rich Muslims who could use their money to help develop community projects of all sorts, but as with state budgets, money mostly gets spent on useless things.[[92]](#footnote-92)
3. *We cannot envisage this project because of colonialism*. This is the last and perhaps most pernicious myth. True enough, the reality of colonization is a gruesome and oppressive one (what he calls “the colonizing coefficient”). Yet this coefficient is incapable of affecting the fundamental value of the individual. This is where the crucial concept of “colonizability” comes in:

There is an historical process that one should not neglect for fear of losing sight of the essence of things, of seeing only what they appear to be. This process does not begin by colonization, but rather by the colonizability that provokes it. In fact, to a certain extent, colonization is the most happy effect of colonizability because it inverts the social evolution that gave birth to the colonizable being in the first place: he only becomes aware of his colonizability once he is colonized. He then finds himself obligated to “denativize” himself in order to become uncolonizable, and it is in this sense that one may understand colonization as an “historical reality.[[93]](#footnote-93)

Hence, one must look at history, not as a politician, but rather as a sociologist. “We then realize that colonization introduced itself into the life of a colonized people as the contradictory factor which enables it to overcome its colonizability. . . . The history of the Muslim world for the last half century is nothing but the historical development of a contradiction introduced by colonialism into the reality characterized by and constituting its colonizability.”[[94]](#footnote-94) On the positive side, colonization liberates latent possibilities of emancipation, and despite the obviously negative impact of the “colonizing coefficient,” history teaches us that colonies do not last forever. Just like a spider which paralyzes its victim so colonialism seeks to destroy a society from the top to the bottom. But in changing its living conditions so radically it also effects a change in the colonized soul. The most powerful change is a growing distinction between colonization and colonizability. But this is precisely why both reformism and modernism in the Muslim world have failed to initiate any lasting and profound change: they have not discerned this distinction—and hence his best definition of colonizability:

That the Muslim might not have at his disposal all the desirable means to develop his personality and actualize his gifts: that is colonialism. But that the Muslim does not even think about efficiently using the means he does dispose of; deploying the extra effort necessary to raise his standard of living, even by rudimentary means; and using his time toward this goal; but rather, to the contrary, surrenders his being to the plan of nativization (*indigènisation*) and reification (*chosification*), thus guaranteeing the success of the colonizing technique; that is colonizability.[[95]](#footnote-95)

I have little space to give an account of Bennabi’s analysis of the chaos and decay of western civilization. That is not his most original contribution, in any case. Suffice it to say that the malady of the west is two-fold: the rapidity of scientific development and colonialism. Cartesian thought brought about a healthy rationalism, but it soon turned to a hyper-Cartesianism with the multiplication of scientific discoveries and advancement. “The European ego, inebriated by the new forces it had liberated, allowed itself to be fascinated by its own genius. But in fact, it was playing the role of the sorcerer’s apprentice. The machine it had created, and which it did not know how to dominate, was soon to direct it from its mechanical brain and swallow it in its iron bowels.”[[96]](#footnote-96) This spirit of hyper-quantification resulted in the European mind’s loss of its moral compass—moral truth was being relativized.

Yet one cannot help but notice that a critique of the west came after a long passage of self-criticism. Bennabi’s ultimate goal—which becomes more obvious in the writing of al-Ghannouchi—is that Muslims regain their specificity, rediscover the genius of their first calling in a new context, and thus make the kind of contribution to human civilization that matches this high calling. Iqbal, he notes, in commenting on how rapidly the world of Islam had turned to the west was only mentioning a particular application of Ibn Khaldun’s general rule, “the conquered nation adopts the forms, ideas and manners of the conquering nation.”[[97]](#footnote-97) The Muslim world (and its problem with women is symptomatic, adds Bennabi) seems condemned to choose between the dead ideas of its past and the already doomed solutions of the west. But there is a third way, he asserts, made more attractive to us as we take stock of the failure of western civilization. He explains, “This [western] experience—prodigious lesson of history in order to understand the destiny of peoples and their civilization—is particularly interesting for the edification of Muslim thought, for it is one of the most perfect successes of the human genius and at the same time its most serious failure.”[[98]](#footnote-98) I end this section with Bennabi’s vision, articulated as it was in the mid twentieth century, at least twelve years before his own country was granted its independence:

It is in fact this universal outward radiance of the west’s culture that turns its present chaos into a global problematic, which we must analyze and understand in its relation to the human problem in its entirety, and, therefore in its relation to the Muslim problem. Such an analysis cannot but give the Muslim person the opportunity to situate himself as a human being, and no longer as a “native” with regard to the European order. A new order would come into being, moving us from the purely material interdependence that constitutes today the essential relationship between a more or less colonist Europe and a Muslim world more or less colonizable to a state of mutual esteem and a more fruitful association. This change would not only benefit the Muslim world, for as the colonial reality imposes heavily upon Muslim life, it also imposes heavily on European life itself: colonialism, which kills the colonized in material ways, morally destroys the colonizer.[[99]](#footnote-99)

# Bennabi’s Mark on Ghannouchi

This last section seeks to brush in broad strokes Bennabi’s legacy in the thought of one leading representative of moderate islamism, Rachid Ghannouchi. The task is made easier by the fact that Azzam S.Tamimi’s recent monograph on Ghannouchi argues for this connection in several places.[[100]](#footnote-100) Perhaps the greatest indication of this influence is Ghannouchi’s own book *Tarıqun il’l-˛a∂ra* (Our Road to Civilization), published only two years after Bennabi’s death.[[101]](#footnote-101) Also, in the early nineties, while in prison, he translated Bennabi’s short treatise on democracy into Arabic and often relied on it.[[102]](#footnote-102) But already in 1973, Ghannouchi published an article, “*Barämij al-falsafa wa-jïl al-àiyäœ*” (“The Agenda of Philosophy and the Lost Generation”) in which he wonders about the direction of Islamic philosophy against the backdrop of problems the Muslim world is facing—loss of confidence, problems of gender, of introvertedness, of a lack of willingness to sacrifice for the sake of others.[[103]](#footnote-103) What is lacking is a firm criterion for the forging of a new culture, which also takes into account Islamic values, the current situation in the world and the foundational issues of humanity and the world. Western philosophy should be studied, but knowing full well that it answers questions that mostly are not relevant to Muslims. Our own Islamic philosophy, contends Ghannouchi, answers questions of the past that seem no longer relevant today and which in addition stirred up much division among Muslims of the classical age. Following Bennabi, he calls these “dead issues” (*qa∂y mayyita*). What our pupils need to study today is the works of modern Islamic thinkers like Muhammad Iqbal, Mawdudi, Abu al-Hasan al-Nadawi, Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid and Muhammad Qutb, and Malek Bennabi.[[104]](#footnote-104) Besides the issues of humankind and its finality, life and its goals, our thinking should focus in a practical manner in order to solve the real problems we face in the realms of nature (*khalqï*), gender (or sexuality: *jinsiyya*), economics, and politics.

In a follow-up article to the last one, Ghannouchi attempts to define the much used but ill-defined term “development” (*taåawwur*).[[105]](#footnote-105) Starting with the Qur’an, he shows that development is a law of the universe (*nämüs al-kawn*). Everything is in motion and this is a sign of life, yet the human being is the only creature who can create culture, and thus civilization. For humans development must be civilizational, that is, “the transition from one level of civilization to a better, higher one.” Then he explains himself, clearly in Bennabian terms:

Whereas we see humankind never ceasing to develop their means of subsistence in the areas of habitation, nourishment, transportation, adaptation and defense, and adding every day to that a new gain that surpasses the gains of the past, as if their history were made up of a series of additions and acts of surpassing that conserve and discern that which is essential (*jawharï*) from the past without being immobilized in it. This leads us to define the process of development by these two operations, or by this double operation, the operation of conserving that which is essential in the past, and the operation of using that as a launching pad for going beyond its realities and acquisitions.[[106]](#footnote-106)

History, continues Ghannouchi, is a people’s (*umma*) memory. A people who forgets its own history falls back into childhood with a kind of destructive naiveté, or worse yet, becomes like an older person afflicted with dementia. Islamic civilization developed its science, philosophy, politics and economics from what it learned from other civilizations that had preceded it. It was not afraid to borrow what was good while purifying it from any negative additions in terms of values that might contradict its own revealed values.[[107]](#footnote-107) Anyone who studies the great civilizations of the past will recognize two basic attitudes in common. The first concerns their appreciation and willingness to learn from “the realizations, practical achievements and techniques” of other civilizations. The second attitude is a reflexive one: an ability to look critically at one’s own civilization and the stage at which it might be at present. Thus, as Muslims in our generation, writes Ghannouchi, we must admit that our own civilization, however advanced it became in the past, nevertheless went into decline (*inùiåaå*). Then follows this paragraph in which he addresses a new generation of Tunisian Muslims and challenges them to arm themselves with a balanced kind of pride, which, in good Bennabian fashion, will translate into effectiveness in changing society’s structures for the good of both the nation and human civilization as a whole:

[This is so] in order that a generation will be trained for our sake, proud of its past, but a pride that is aware and armed with the results of the world’s practical experiences; a generation in whose soul burns a new spirit, overflowing with movement and abounding in the hope of constructing a new civilization in which people will be liberated from all authority (*sulåän*) that is not that of the Truth—may His majesty be uplifted, people bestowed with the grace of life and reason; a civilization which restores the harmony of humanity now torn between matter and spirit. . . a civilization in which political power draws from truth, goodness, justice, and not from the instruments of production and not the passions of tyranny.[[108]](#footnote-108)

The only word in the above paragraph that might indicate that Bennabi was not its author is the word “truth”—not that he doubted in any way that Islam was indeed truth, but he was more of a sociologist and a philosopher of history than a theologian. Bennabi consistently displayed a catholicity in his analysis of civilization. The Islamic one was unique, he would say, not essentially superior to the other ones that had preceded or followed it. Ghannouchi, on the other hand, while clearly building on Bennabi’s categories and concepts, proceeds to a narrowing of their application. Take for example this paragraph from the last article of the *Maqälät* (Articles) volume, entitled “Islamic Thought between Idealism and Realism,” published in 1982.[[109]](#footnote-109) The contemporary Islamic movement (*al-ùaraka al-Islämiyya*) for the last 50 years in the *Mashriq* and for the last ten years in the *Maghrib* has. . .

freed the minds and souls of Muslims from the heritage of the age of decadence and deviations in worship, conviction, and behavior, and freed them at the same time from several destructive elements originating in the intellectual and spiritual invasion of western civilization. The heroes are Rashid Rida, Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Mawdudi and Malek Bennabi. They were able in spite of their lack of resources to stand up to the western ideological offensive which preceded and followed the military offensive and to return to Islam its proper consideration in the eyes of a large segment of this generation, and to reveal the deception of western civilization and the emptiness of its humanitarian contents in spite of its technical superiority. What is more, they urged the Muslim community (*umma*) to consider the necessity of clinging to Islam as creed, legislation (*sharïœa*), culture, way of life, and as an ideology which generates both civilization and liberation.[[110]](#footnote-110)

In some ways, Ghannouchi is closer in thought to the Moroccan leader of independence, the Qarawiyyın-trained *ﬁlim*, ‘Allal al-Fasi (1910-1974) than he is to Bennabi. Though al-Fasi wrote a highly popular book shortly after moving to Cairo (*Al-Naqd al-dhtı,* Self-Criticism)[[111]](#footnote-111) which developed similar themes to those treated by Bennabi with little reference to *sharıﬁa*, and while he devoted the rest of his life to leading the political party he had founded, nevertheless he did write three books on the subject of Islamic law and how it should be applied to the Moroccan situation.[[112]](#footnote-112) As a reformist/*salafi*, al-Fasi was sympathetic to Rashıd Ri∂’s call for a restoration of the caliphate, or at least, as the fervent Moroccan nationalist that he was, for a federation of Islamic states. Likewise, Ghannouchi remains convinced that if a country has a Muslim majority, by virtue of the freedom of all citizens, and for the sake of protecting the state, this majority has the right “to impart on public life a color of their choosing.”[[113]](#footnote-113) But what does he mean by “Islamic state” and how does this kind of state relate to our twenty-first century world order? The last section concludes with a short answer to this question, and thus seeking to answer its twin question: “how does one draw the line between a reformist and an islamist?”

# Back to the Fuzzy Borders

Ghannouchi offers his readers a glimpse of his spiritual heritage in the dedication of his influential prison work, later finished in London, *Al-Ùurriyyät al-œämma fï al-dawla al-Islämiyya* (The General Liberties in the Islamic State). First, he mentions his “spiritual fathers”: Hasan al-Banna, then al-Mawdudi, the “martyr Sayyid Qutb,” “our teacher, Malek Bennabi,” “the leader-renewer, Hasan al-Turabi,” al-Khomeini, Shariati, Ben Badis, “the symbol of the Islamic call in North Africa,” and many others.[[114]](#footnote-114) Shariati and Ben Badis would, by common usage, be categorized, along with Bennabi, with the Islamic reform movement of the twentieth century. The Muslim Brothers, on the other hand, and Qutb in particular, are naturally considered to be the originators of the radical islamists movements that continue to wage *jihd* on their respective “Muslim” (*jhilı*) governments or among the ranks of “international terrorists.”

Building on Shepard’s typology, Olivier Carré, a Qutb specialist, points to the recent appearance of what he calls “Post-Islamic Self-Assertion,” which not only includes some neo-traditionalists, and Muslim secularists, but also some islamists, and Ghannouchi in particular.[[115]](#footnote-115) I have no space here to argue this point in detail, but only to show that, on Ghannouchi’s understanding of the Islamic state and its relation to the international political order, he could arguably be classified as either “reformist”[[116]](#footnote-116) or “post-islamist,” and this, mainly because of his Bennabian view of civilization.

Perhaps Bennabi’s greatest contribution was to apply a modern sociological approach to the linking of culture, individual civilizations in time and space, and human civilization in the latter twentieth century. Interestingly, one of his sources of inspiration came from the poet from Martinique, the black poet, artist and activist, Aimé Césaire (b.1913). In a passage about the evil of colonialism in his *Vocation de l’Islam*, Bennabi quotes two whole paragraphs from his work.[[117]](#footnote-117) It is clear that he greatly esteems Césaire’s Third World anti-colonial thought, including his concept of civilization, the “decivilizing” impact of colonialism on the colonizers and specifically the view that Nazism was the natural consequence of the western colonial enterprise and mentality.[[118]](#footnote-118) “Third Worldism” as an ideology has largely been displaced by the anti-globalization activism of this generation,[[119]](#footnote-119) what Jackie Smith has dubbed “transnational social movement organizations” (TSMOs).[[120]](#footnote-120) Already in the dedication to his *Al-˘urriyt al-ﬁ◊mma*, Ghannouchi was expressing his solidarity with these movements:

To the organizations, personalities and powers struggling for the sake of justice, peace, dialogue and cooperation between peoples and civilizations, and I single out among them the Tunisian Union for the Defense of Human Rights, Amnesty International, and thus the western intellectual vanguard of those for the sake of better understanding and cooperation with Islam, its leaders and *umma*, among them François Burgat, the American John Esposito, the British Ernest Gellner and the German Hoffman.[[121]](#footnote-121)

How does “struggling for the sake of justice, peace and dialogue” fit in with his conception of the Islamic state—the hallmark, after all, of the islamist position? The Islamic state for Ghannouchi is inseparable from the concept of democracy, which is an embodiment of the *sharıﬁa*’s purposes (*maqßid al-sharıﬁa*). Democracy, then, is made up of form and essence. While the form varies from one state to another, democratic states agree on the essentials: “principles of equality, election, separation of powers, political pluralism, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly, and the right of the majority to rule and the minority to oppose.”[[122]](#footnote-122) To its credit, democracy is the political system that enshrines the dignity of the human person. For democracy “is not only the operation that consists of transferring authority to the masses and the declaration that a people is granted sovereignty by the legal binding of a constitutional text,” argues Ghannouchi. It is rather a people’s mindset, or, more precisely their humanist mentality, which guarantees that their system will honor the freedom and dignity of each individual. And here, unsurprisingly, he relies on Bennabi for his argument:

Thus our venerable Maghrebi teacher (*ﬁallmatun*) Malek, Ibn Khaldun’s grandson, launches into the praise of the European renaissance as he examines the roots of the democratic sentiment that explodes in the famous declaration of human rights in the United States of America—the spiritual and political crowning of the French Revolution [sic]. He also finds the roots of that sentiment in the Reformation and the Renaissance, which formed the essential cultural element of the European’s personality in the spiritual, technological and intellectual spheres. All these factors contributed to the formation of the humanist school (*al-madhhab al-insnı*), so-called because of the high value it places on the person of the citizen.[[123]](#footnote-123)

Assuming, then for the sake of the argument that moderate islamists of Ghannouchi’s kind are content with Islamic states as described above, what might this imply for their participation in the wider circle of global nations? Perhaps this is best exemplified in a letter Ghannouchi sent to Mr. Edward Djerejian, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asian affairs, who had made a speech in 1992 stating that western civilization had been vastly enriched by Islam’s civilization in the past. As the motive for the letter was a request to pressure his own government to grant him an entry visa, perhaps he could be seen as more irenic than usual. Yet the sentiment and vision expressed in these words are consistent with his writings overall:

We want you to know that we Muslims harbor no ill feelings for you or for your superpower status, but we want our freedom in our own countries; we want our right to choose the system we feel comfortable with. We want the relationship between you and us to be based on friendship, and not on subordination. We see a potential for an exchange of ideas, for a flow of information and for cultural exchange in an era governed by the rules of competition and cooperation rather than the rules of hegemony and subordination. We call on you to halt your aggression against our people and against our religion. We invite you to a historic reconciliation, to rapprochement and to cooperation. After all, you are the closest of all other humans to us, in terms of geography, religion, civilization, and interests.[[124]](#footnote-124)

The third and last part of Ghannouchi’s *Al-˘urriyt* is concerned with guarantees within the Islamic government against the danger of tyranny.[[125]](#footnote-125) This is where Ghannouchi’s book becomes truly his own—the product of someone who writes within the four walls of a prison, incarcerated by his own Muslim government. Among the guarantees, he lists God’s higher legitimacy and the people’s censorship/supervision (*riqba*); the imamate as contract; closeness to the people, with no hiding or distance from them; the principle of separation of powers, or their cooperation.[[126]](#footnote-126) He then discusses additional guarantees such as Islamic education, an independent judiciary, the forbidding of torture, the function of *˛isba* (the moral supervision of public opinion), and international agreements. Finally, it is under the rubric of an Islamic nation’s foreign policy that six indicative guarantees are listed. Only the first guarantee is problematic—mainly because the two terms *daﬁwa* and *sharıﬁa* remain largely undefined in this context:

1. The freedom of Islamic *daﬁwa* and the preeminence of its *sharıﬁa* over every other legislation
2. Full independence and no following of any international axis
3. Peace and nonaggression among nations
4. Cooperation on the basis of justice and reciprocity
5. Commitment to international agreements and documents
6. Response to aggression (*radd al-ﬁadwn*)

# Conclusion

The Algerian thinker Malek Bennabi, through his original sociological analysis of human civilization, proffered a cooperative model for the relations between Muslim nations among themselves, and between themselves as a civilizational grouping and western nations. Without mincing his words about the destructive nature of colonialism and the signs of decadence in western civilization, he emphasized the urgent need for Muslim nations to overcome their greatest challenge—colonizability. Rachid Gannouchi, on the other hand, represents the group of students who were profoundly influenced by Bennabi’s Islamic seminars and books and yet who engaged in Islamic activism, which in some cases could end in violence.

Bennabi’s critique of ﬁAbdüh and Ben Badis’s Islamic reformism was not over its theology but rather over its timidity in seriously tackling the socioeconomic problems at hand. Bennabi was a new kind of reformist who argued that a renaissance of the Islamic civilization is necessary both for the sake of Muslims catching up with the west and for the sake of contributing its needed values to the edification of a more just and peaceful human civilization. Ghannouchi wholeheartedly agrees. Yet the borders between his reformist position and his islamist discourse on the application of *sharıﬁa* remain to be clarified. If by an “Islamic state” he means only a Muslim-majority nation that seeks inspiration for its laws from the ethical principles enshrined in the *sharıﬁa* —a view which seems to prevail in his writings—then he is a true disciple of Bennabi. If however he means a more literal application of historical *sharıﬁa* in personal status or criminal law, then he seems to fall more in the islamist category, by advocating norms that directly contravene those of international human rights conventions.

It must be noted, however, that his advocacy for harmonious and peaceful relations between civilizational blocks based on mutual respect and cooperation is already an “abrogation” (*naskh*) of historical *sharıﬁa* norms of *dr al-Islm* and *dr al-˛arb* (“abode of Islam” and “abode of war”). The above material would seem to indicate that for him as well as for Bennabi, the framework of *sharıﬁa* had a specific historical framework that must be drastically reworked to fit the present context of democratic electoral governments, nation states and their own Islamic perspective on building a more just and cooperative human civilization in today’s global reality. Terrorist networks will continue, whether related to Islam or not, fueled by many other factors than religion. Yet at the same time it may be that, considering Ghannouchi’s influence, we may be seeing a growing tide of neo-reformism, or “post-islamism,” in the Muslim world.

1. “Ibn Khaldun’s Understanding of Civilizations and the Dilemmas of Islam and the West Today,” *Middle East Journal* 56/1(Winter 2002) 20-45, at 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. His seminal article created a unprecedented stir in academic and political circles: “The Clash of Civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs* 72, 3 (Summer 1993), [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York:Bard, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Millenium: A History of the Last Thousand Years* (New York: Scribner, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 41. Dale F. Eickelman contends that Huntington relied on Toynbee’s theory of twenty-one civilizations, of which only six survive today. He also points out some of the simplistic notions that Toynbee sometimes puts forth, notably about the Ottomans. Huntington should have learned from Toynbee about the dead-end of representing “‘other’ religions and civilizations as timeless essences” (“Muslim Politics: The Prospects for Democracy in North Africa and the Middle East,” in *Islam, Democracy, and the State in North Africa,* John P. Entelis, ed., Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997, 18). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “The Clash of Civilizations?”, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “The underlying problem in the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power” (*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order,* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996*,* 217). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Pope John Paul II is one of these voices. For a helpful analysis and expansion of the Pope’s message of January 1st, 2001, “A Dialogue between Cultures for a Civilization of Love and Peace,” see Maurice Borrmans’ “Cultures et civilizations au service de l’homme: du conflit à l’harmonie,” *Islamochristiana* 27(2001), 37-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Ibn Khaldun’s Understanding,” 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Peter Falk contends that the west is now at the height of its “civilizational hegemony.” Though this attitude bodes badly for the Confucian, Buddhist, or African civilizations, it seeks to exclude Muslims in particular: “if the primary question is either the existence of a civilizational right to participate or the role of equitable civilizational participation in a legitimate world order, then the wider inquiry is tied to this narrower one that dwells upon Islam. The narrower focus has the advantage of responding to the subjective side of civilizational exclusion in the crucial sense that Islam perceives itself as having been long victimized within the framework of world order, and in turn, is frequently perceived in the West as posing a multidimensional challenge” (cf. his chapter “The Geopolitics of Exclusion: The Case of Islam,” in his recent book, *Human Rights Horizons: The Pursuit of Justice in a Globalizing World,* New York: Routledge, 2000, 153). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I will use the French spelling of his name, and not the strict Arabic transliteration of it (Råshid al-Ghann¥sh•), following Azzam S. Tamimi in his recent monograph, *Rachid al-Ghannouchi: A Democrat within Islamism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I also follow the French lead in writing islamist with a lower case “i.” As the ideology of a kind of “political Islam” developed uniquely in the 20th century, and as it does not represent the views of the majority of Muslims in the world today, it functions precisely like the adjectives “conservative,” “fundamentalist,” or “communist.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I have found four Arabic works on Bennabi’s thought, all of them with the word *˙a∂åra* (civilization) in the titles, including one published simultaneously in Beirut and Damascus in 1998. Two English monographs were published in the 1990s in Malaysia on him but are not available in the US, and a handful of articles. Only one of his books was translated in English (*Vocation de L’Islam*): *Islam in History and Society*, tr. Asthma Rashid (Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing, 1991), later reprinted in India (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology,” *I.J.M.E.S.* 19 (1987), 307-336. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Political Islam in the Maghreb: The Nonviolent Dimension,” in *Islam, Democracy, and the State in North Africa,* John P. Entelis, ed., Bloomington (IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 43-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “Malek Bennabi (mort en 1973): Regard d’un Algérien sur l’Occident,” *EurOrient* 4(Feb./May 1999), 73-84, at 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “Political Islam in North Africa: The Nonviolent Dimension,” in *Islam, Democracy, and the State in North Africa,* John P. Entelis, ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Islam et pensée contemporaine en Algérie: la revue al-Asala (1971-1981)* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1991), 51, 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Naturally, it is *madrasa* in Arabic. Yet this is how it is pronounced in the Algerian Arabic dialect, and how it is written in his autobiography (cf. next note). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Mémoires d’un témoin du siècle* (Algiers: Editions Nationales Algériennes, 1965), 77-8. He knows little Arabic at this point, but he does begin to read some Arabic books his second year. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 106-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 107. Other books that mark him at this stage are the works of the French 18th century philosopher Condillac, and a French copy of John Dewey’s *The Way We Think* (ibid., 139). The latter especially, in his own words, gave a pragmatic bent to his ideas and set him on the search for effectiveness. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Emad Eldin Shahin, *Political Ascent: Contemporary Islamic Movements in North Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This caused some difficulty for Bennabi as his uncle was a Sufi leader in the Aissawiya brotherhood and he had participated a good deal with his uncle in that movement. Yet now he was beginning to embrace the reformist point of view. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Upon graduation, after a year or so of floundering, he decided to volunteer as a clerk for Muslim courts in several rural districts. Then for two years, when he reached the required age of twenty-two, he was hired in two different districts successively. This gave him the opportunity to study Algerian society from a more sociological perspective. He realized these rural folk had two urgent needs. First, as they were the victims of Sufi brotherhood exploitation through the collection of Zakat monies, they were in dire need of the *ißlå˙* message. Second, they needed to be protected from the encroachment of the “colons”: “I was afraid that the colons would come here and pervert this good human dough which contained so many naivetés and such great virtues” (*Mémoires*, 223). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 226. His visit to Ben Badis is also mentioned in a two page biography in the 1996 Algerian biographical dictionary (*Mémoire Algérienne: Le Dictionnaire Biographique*, ed. Achour Cheurfi, Algiers: Éditions Dahab, 182). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Interestingly, from the beginning, the *ißlå˙•* influence coincided with an influx of Egyptian records and music (he contends that it was Tebessa who first imported them). Then theatrical troops came into vogue, and they were often political. Yet the French did not yet take notice, he remarks (Mémoires, 228). Clearly, the Egyptian impact of reformist ideas and culture served both the cause of pan-Arabism and Algerian nationalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. He marries a French woman who converts to Islam and changes her name to Khadija (*Mémoire Algérienne*, 183). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. “An Islamic Humanist in the 20th-Century: Malik Bennabi,” *The Maghreb Review*, 17: 1-2 (1992), pp. 69-83, at 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. Christelow indicates that this first book was dedicated to his good friend, Muhammad Ben Sa’i, a former student of Louis Massignon, who, along with Bennabi, turned against him when he began arguing for the status quo in colonial Algeria. Yet while Ben Sa’i left that experience “shattered, physically and emotionally,” Bennabi was able to hold on to what he had learned from Massignon and still thrive amidst the brutal chaos of the struggle for independence (ibid., p. 71). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. The Preface was written by the al-Azhar professor, Shaykh Mu˛ammad Drz. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Mémoire Algérienne*, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. He also has a number of his books translated into Arabic. The Algerian biography also lists seven new books written in Egypt, including the one cited below, and *The Idea of an Islamic Commonwealth* (*Mémoire*, 183). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. This is the only source that mentions this important fact. Bennabi was a nationalist and as thus, never questioned the nation-state reality of the Muslim world. Times had changed indeed, and very few would have advocated in the late 1950s for a restoration of the caliphate as Rashıd Ri∂ had some thirty years earlier. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Ta√ammult* (Copyright by the lawyer ﬁUmar Musqwı, Tripoli, Lebanon; distributed by Dr al-Fikr, Damascus, 1977, 3rd ed.), 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *Mémoire Algérienne*, 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Political Ascent*, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The AUMA officially joined the FLN during the war (ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 116. Both Entelis (“Political Islam in the Maghreb,” 58) and Deheuvels (*Islam et pensée*, 51) give Bennabi the leading role in the creation of Al-Qiyam. Abderrahim Lamchichi also mentions him as the pivotal figure of the movement, but speaks of a different journal—this one in Arabic—*Journal for Muslim Education* (*Majallat al-tahdhıb al-Islmı*). It is possible that Bennabi may have had his hands in both journals, but judging by the excerpts offered by Lamchichi, it is more likely Bennabi was mostly involved in the French one (*Islam et contestation au Maghreb*, Paris: Éditions l’Harmattan, 1989, 154). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Christelow surmises that Bennabi was chosen for this influential post as an “ideological bridge” between “the progressive nationalist camp” and “the Islamic reformist camp,” and that he in fact was the key proponent of the Arabization policy started under President Boumedienne from 1965 on (“An Islamic Humanist, p. 79). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Political Ascent*, 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. He consistently associates Bennabi with the eastward looking islamists and calls him “the fundamentalist thinker” (*Islam et pensée*, 260). Naturally, having lived in Egypt he must have known some of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders. On the other hand, he was paid by the Nasser government and his writings have little connection (if at all) with the *Ikwån* ideology. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Lamchichi informs us that Al-Qiyam did not hesitate to get involved in politics and “to refer to the ideology of radical islamism” (*Islam et contestation*, 154). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Entelis is the only one to mention this (“Political Islam in the Maghreb,” p. 58). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. I am also following the thesis put forward by Ahmed Rouadjia in his chapter, “Discourse and Strategy of the Algerian Islamist Movement (1986-1992),” in *The Islamist Dilemma: The Political Role of Islamist Movements in the Contemporary Arab World*, ed. Laura Guazzone (Reading, PA: Ithaca Press, 1995). He argues that the FIS was a coalition between “Algerianists” and *salaf•s*, the more moderate of which see themselves as the rightful heirs of the AUMA—as the Hamas and Nahda movements (Nahda has direct ties to Ghannouchi’s Nahda in Tunis). Another Algerian specialist, Mohammed Tozy, identifies four main currents in Algerian islamism: the FIS, Hamas, the salafi followers of Sahnoun, and the followers of Bennabi, mostly in the Nahda party (“Les tendances de l’islamisme en Algérie,” *Confluences* 12, Fall 1994, pp. 51-61, at p. 55). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Algiers: Omar Bennaissa, 1976. The first three chapters, at least in a similar form, were part of a 1964 book, *Perspectives Algériennes*, and later were translated into Arabic for an Egyptian edition entitled, *Afq jaz√iriyya: lil-˛adra, lil-thaqfa, lil-mafhümiyya* (*Algerian Perspectives: on Civilization, Culture, and Conceptualism*, series *Mushkilt al-˘adra*, 2nd ed., Cairo: Maktabat ﬁAmmr, 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Les Grand Thèmes*, 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1954 [1950]. The best translation is literally “Islam’s Vocation.” Significantly, he argues that Islam must regain its civilization within the present context, in order to make its unique contribution to the ongoing, wider civilization of humankind in the last quarter of the twentieth century. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Algiers: El Bay’yinate, 1990, 1st corrected edition with index. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. *Les Grands Thèmes*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid., 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. The editor, Nour-Eddine Boukrouh, in a footnote, points to a recent North-South conference as something Bennabi was calling for some 20 years before (ibid., 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. See especially pages 43-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Les Grands Thèmes*, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid., 29. He often comes back to the Japanese example: “How does one explain that Japan, in less than fifty years, transformed itself from a medieval society to a modern one? They had a work ethic and a policy of austerity, general conditions that fall under the category of “moral coefficient.” Here is a society that built itself up on the basis of a civilization, not on the basis of its products. Their emphasis on developing the human person and its ideas explains that they succeeded where Muslim countries still fall short (ibid., 31). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Ibid., 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. *Le problème des idées* (Algiers: El Bay’yinate, 1990, 1st corrected edition with index), 20. This next section is mainly drawn from this 1970 text. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Ibid., 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid., 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. *Vocation de l’Islam*, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. *Le Problème des idées*, 46-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ibid., 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Admittedly, remarks Bennabi, some of Muhammad’s choices would not be popular today. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Ibid., 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. He explains that the failure of reformism has led the Muslim community into tyranny. First, the tyranny of things: a) on a psychological and moral plane things—technology, status symbols, corruption of officials; b) socially, the quantitative takes over the qualitative; c) intellectually a book is considered good because it has many pages; d) politically, economic planning is effectively reduced to a status quo in favor of the elites. But the tyranny of people is even worse because we start worshiping people who then, because they are fallible, disappoint and create much bitterness and division (ibid., 62-4). [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *Vocation de l’Islam*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. “Only the soul enables humankind to rise above.” [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. *Vocation de l’islam*, 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid., 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. This is not to say, however, that Muslims had lost their individual faith, Bennabi hastens to add. Islam never died out in the personal piety it continued to inspire in millions of people. However, he warns, one must never confuse individual salvation of the soul and the historical evolution of societies. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Ibid., 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Ibid., 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid., 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. His training in *fiqh* is rudimentary, and he actually never writes about *shar•>a*, or how to implement it—in stark contrast to another reformist Maghrebi nationalist exiled in Egypt at the same time, the Moroccan ‘Allal al-Fasi. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. It was characteristic that Bennabi was often despised and brushed aside, from some *>ulamå<* on the one side, and from some western educated scholars on the other. Raouf notes that his compatriot, Mohammed Arkoun, wrote about him in dismissive terms, “an engineer who got interested in religious questions” (“Malek Bennabi,” 83, quoting Arkoun in his *L’Islam, hier et demain*, 186). [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Mu˛ammad ﬁAbdüh and Rashıd Ri∂* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. *Vocation de l’Islam*, 31-42. In the Preface (Avant-Propos) of this work, he informs us that after setting down the defining lines of this book he ran across H. A. R. Gibb’s *Les tendances modernes de l’Islam* and noticed that he very much agreed with Gibb—though possessed nowhere near the competence of “this eminent professor.” He has some disagreements as well, and these come in various parts of the book. These revolve mostly around the issue of “atomism,” which Gibb, in one of his more “orientalist” moments, attributes to the “Arab imagination” (p. 7). Quite the contrary, argues Bennabi, Islamic civilization in its classical period had developed a sophisticated legal philosophy, made important scientific discoveries in several fields, including the pioneering work of Ibn Khaldun in historical sociology. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. *Vocation de l’Islam*, 47. He explains: “the intellectual in the European school, who has not even sufficiently acquired the true meaning of effectiveness by which the Christian can still be distinguished from the Muslim, will borrow more willingly from the materialism of Europe its bourgeois tendency—that is, its materialistic tastes—rather than its proletarian tendency—that is, its dialectical discipline” (ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ibid., 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Ibid. He comments, “Persons immobilized in their mediocrity and in their imperfectible imperfection become the moral elite of a society where truth can only give birth to a kind of nihilism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Ibid., 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Ibid., 62. “By multiplying worthlessness one will never obtain anything but worthlessness.” [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. He gives two examples: The 1948 Arab League delegation’s budget at a UN convention in Paris was about half a million dollars, yet not one document was published on the question of Palestine as a result. “This enormous disproportion between the means and the results is typical of all Muslim public activity” (ibid., 64-5). Why is it that people venerate the tomb of the late Algerian thinker Ali El Hammami but have not found the way to publish any of his works? [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Ibid., 65. Thus one must also distinguish between a “colonized” land, and a “conquered” one. In the former, the particular synthesis of man, soil and time gave birth to an uncolonizable person (like Rome’s conquest of Greece, or England’s conquest of Ireland), but in the latter, foreign occupation becomes colonization (like the British in India or the French in North Africa). [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Ibid., 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Ibid., 66-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Ibid., 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Ibid., 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat Within Islamism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22, 28-9, 31, 32-3, 40, 63-8, 76, 82, 89, 140, 211, 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Tunis: Ma†baﬁa al-Maﬁrifa, 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Originally a lecture in French delivered to North African students in Paris in 1960. As mentioned above, this is one of the chapters in *Les Grands Thèmes* (98-130). Tamimi mentions this detail (*Rachid Ghannouchi*, 64). [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. In *Maqålåt,* al-Juz< al-awwal (Tunis: Ma†ba>a T¥nis Qartåj al-Sharqiyya, 2nd ed., 1988), 9-14. This book is composed of seventeen articles from 1973 to 1982, published in several newspapers and journals in several countries. None have the word *˙a∂åra* (civilization) in their titles, but the topics are certainly related. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Ibid., 14. Citing Mawdudi and Qutb in the same breath as Bennabi would not have been the latter’s choice. Though Bennabi was initially supportive of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (e.g., *Vocation de l’Islam*, 56, 105, 141), he later became disenchanted, and this even before he went to Egypt. In a 1954 footnote to the 1950 text, Bennabi speaks of a trip made to the mideast, specifically to research this movement, which forced him to modify his judgment. The movement under al-Banna’s successors, he concluded, had become a political movement in which religion simply became a political tool and not a civilizational one. He admits his disappointment. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. *Al-Ta†awwur = i˙tifåΩ + tajåwuz* (Development = Conservatism + Going Beyond), ibid., 17-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Ibid., 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Ibid., 22-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Ibid., 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. *al-Fikr al-Islämï bayn al-mithäåliyya wa-l-wäqiœiyya*, published in the Tunisian daily, *al-Waùda al-Tünisiyya* (ibid., 183-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Ibid., 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Rabat: Maåbaœat al-Risäla [1952], 1979, 5th ed. Al-Fasi returned to Morocco the year Bennabi arrived, so it may be that they never met, though undoubtedly were aware of each other’s works. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. His most famous one, *Maqßid al-sharıﬁa al-Islmiyya wa-makrimuh* (The Objectives and Ethics of Islamic Law) is quoted with evident approval by Ghannouchi in his magnum opus, *Al-˘urriyt al-ﬁ◊mma fı al-Dawla al-Islmiyya* (Beirut: Markaz Dirst al-Wi˛da al-ﬁArabiyya, 1993). For an evaluation of al-Fasi’s work in this respect, see my chapter, “‘Allal al-Fasi: Shari‘a as Blueprint for a Righteous Global Citizenship,” In *Shari’a: Islamic Law in the Contemporary Context*, eds. Abbas Madanat and Frank Griffel (Stanford University Press, 2007), 183-203. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi*, 78, quoting and translating from his *Al-˘urriyt al-ﬁ◊mma*, 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. *Al-˘urriyt*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. “*’A L’Ombre du Coran’* Revisité: Les lendemains possibles de la pensée de Sayyid Qutb et du Qutbisme,” *Arabica* 48 (2001), 81-111, at 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. The next paragraph after the “spiritual fathers” dedicates the book to the “pioneers of the Islamic university” (general sense of learned *umma*): al-Afghani, Abduh and Rida, including Shakib Arsalan, al-Tahir Ben Ashur and Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab, “the caller of *taw˛ıd*” (*Al-˘urriyt*, 5)—again, a deliberate mixing of the usual categories of reformist and islamist. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. No reference given, however. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. *Vocation de l’Islam*, 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. For a excellent book on the impact of “Third Worldism” on Algerian politics, and its transformation into islamism, see Robert Malley, *The Call from Algeria: Third Worldism, Revolution, and the Turn to Islam* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996). Yet not once does he mention Bennabi. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. “Building Political Will after UNCED: EarthAction International,” in *The Globalization Reader,* eds. Frank J..Lechner and John Boli (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 400-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. *Al-˘urriyt*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi,* 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. *Al-˘urriyt*, 76-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Tamimi, *Rachid Ghannouchi*, 181. The unpublished letter Tamimi translates here is dated June 14, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. *Îamånåt >adam al-jawr aw al-˙urriyåt al->åmma f• al-niΩåm al-Islåm•* (Guarantees against Injustice, or the General Liberties in the Islamic Order). The substitution of “order” (*niΩåm*) for “state” (*dawla*) is significant. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Ibid., pp. 226-248. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)