



Universidad Nacional de Catamarca - Facultad de Humanidades
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The Organizational Structure of Islamic Currents in Algeria

Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood as Models

Mohand Azzoug

University of Algiers 2 – Abou El Kacem Saâdallah

Mohand.azzoug@univ-alger2.dz

Prs Siham Cherif

University of Algiers 2 – Abou El Kacem Saâdallah

siham.cherif@univ-alger2.dz

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Abstract

This study examines the organizational structures of two major Islamic currents in Algeria: Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood. It analyzes how each current establishes authority, maintains internal cohesion, regulates membership, and mobilizes its followers. The findings indicate that the Salafi current rejects formal bureaucratic organization and partisan affiliation on doctrinal grounds, yet operates through a coherent informal structure. This structure is characterized by centralized religious authority, shared doctrinal and behavioral norms, symbolic leadership, decentralized activities, and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion based primarily on religious rulings and adherence to the Salafi methodology. By contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood adopts a formal, hierarchical, and bureaucratic model governed by statutes, consultative councils, executive bodies, and local organizational units. It also extends its social and political influence through political parties, associations, student organizations, trade unions, and civil-society networks. Despite their contrasting institutional forms, both currents possess effective mechanisms for preserving collective identity, ensuring discipline, building trust, and maintaining organizational continuity. The central difference lies not in the



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presence or absence of organization, but in its form and sources of legitimacy: Salafism relies predominantly on informal religious authority and symbolic capital, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood depends on formal institutional rules and administrative decision-making.

Keywords: Algeria, Islamic currents, Salafism, Muslim Brotherhood, organizational structure, informal organization, bureaucratic organization, religious authority.

Introduction :

The organizational structure of Islamic currents refers to the framework of rules, relationships, forms, and symbols within which an Islamic current—or several such currents—operates coherently. This framework identifies the leadership authorized to issue decisions, legal opinions (fatwas), and directives that bind its followers. It also establishes the conditions of affiliation or membership, the roles assigned to members and the responsibilities arising from those roles, as well as working mechanisms, means of communication, and relations with others. In this context, the study is limited to the Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood currents in Algeria. The Salafi current is structured as an informal organization governed by symbols, observable practices, and distinguishing features under an agreed-upon leadership, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood operates within a formal framework governed by official regulations and organizational rules from which members may not depart.

Section One: The Organizational Structure of the Salafi Current and the Rejection of Bureaucratic Constraints

The organizational structure of the Salafi current must be unpacked in order to understand its configuration, the methods by which it builds a network of trust among its members and grassroots base, and the formation of the group's symbolic capital, which enables it to remain cohesive without bureaucratic constraints.

1. The Problem of Organization in the Salafi Current: Between Rejecting Partisanship and Building an Informal Horizontal Organization

It is indisputable that a human group seeking to achieve specific objectives cannot do so without some form of organization, including its symbols, leaders, followers, grassroots base, and the means used to attain the desired end. The cumulative experience of everyday political and social life has produced organizational structures in the form of political parties, trade unions, and associations. At its core, this idea is as old as humanity itself, because human beings are naturally inclined to associate in order to realize shared ideas and objectives through agreed means and causes (Al-Khazarji, 2021, p. 11). Accordingly, an Islamic party has been defined as "an organized segment that adheres precisely to the nation's ideas, concepts, political decisions, positions, and resolutions, sharing its rights and obligations" (Al-Khazarji, 2021, p. 196).

The Salafi current, historically represented by the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama, took an interest in formal movement-based organization and regarded it as one of

the most important vehicles for embracing the reform project and advancing it in practice, as well as one of the principal factors supporting continuity (Ahmad, 2014/2015, p. 131). The Association was therefore established as a formal organization and submitted its documents to the authorities for accreditation. Although its mission was religious and educational rather than political, it respected those who disagreed with it and acknowledged their right to establish political parties. The eminent scholar Ibn Badis stated: "The Association neither supports one party against another nor opposes any party. Rather, it upholds truth, justice, and goodness wherever they are found, and resists falsehood, injustice, and evil from whatever quarter they arise." Ibn Badis consequently saw no difficulty in cooperating with parties from which he differed politically and ideologically (Ahmad, 2014/2015, p. 267). Shaykh al-Tayyib al-'Uqbi held the same position.

Returning, however, to the reference foundations of the contemporary Salafi current, it regards parties, associations, and trade unions as blameworthy innovations—even when their adherents undertake not to violate Islamic law—because they are newly introduced practices that the Prophet Muhammad did not undertake. An authentic hadith states: "God did not send any prophet except that it was incumbent upon him to guide his nation to the best of what he knew for them" (Muslim, n.d.). Had there been any good in partisanship or party membership, the Prophet would have practiced it. Whoever adopts it has therefore introduced into religion something that God did not prescribe (Al-Albani, n.d.). On this view, party affiliation is impermissible even when intended as a means of drawing closer to God or empowering Islam (Abu Yahya, n.d., p. 15), because the means of religious propagation are considered textually determined (Abu Yahya, n.d., p. 59).

This raises an unavoidable question: If the Salafi current rejects partisanship and formal organization as innovations—even when they operate within legally or religiously acceptable frameworks and pursue legitimate ends—does it also reject the essence of the party idea, namely organization and collective action toward agreed objectives? Close examination shows the Salafi current to be among the most highly organized currents: it has an authoritative shaykh who is followed; intermediaries or students of religious knowledge; a grassroots base and followers; symbols; channels for disseminating the group's convictions, including lessons, study circles, and publications; duties and prohibitions; and mechanisms by which anyone who violates them is deemed outside the group. To overcome this dilemma and maintain an organization that preserves its existence and protects its distinctiveness, the Salafi current adopts the following organizational frameworks.

2. Organic Solidarity Among the Current's Followers

Émile Durkheim's concept of organic solidarity in *The Division of Labor in Society* may be applied to the Salafi current, which organizes itself informally and makes similarity among its affiliates the basis of internal relationships (Durkheim, 1986, pp. 87–100). However widely its affiliates are dispersed across Algeria's provinces, their emotional affinity, similarity in

appearance, and common pattern of religiosity require them to refer back to a central authority represented by a shaykh or group of shaykhs who possess symbolic capital. Departing from this central authority—or failing to consult it or comply with its fatwas and directives—ultimately results in exclusion from the group.

3. Decentralization of Activity

An observer of the Salafi landscape in Algeria finds that students of religious knowledge and followers conduct continuing activities in the provinces and localities where they are present without needing a program issued by the central leadership. Study circles and lessons, the printing, publication, and distribution of books and pamphlets, the organization of educational courses, and the recording and online dissemination of clips and lessons are all activities broadly agreed upon by followers and students of knowledge. Emphasis is placed on the volume of activity rather than on a specific type of activity; consequently, there is neither a unified program nor an agreed timetable. Nevertheless, these activities collectively strengthen cohesion among followers and cultivate Salafi consciousness in society. An activity organizer may still be called to account by the leadership, represented by the authoritative shaykh, if the activity departs from the Salafi methodology or violates the group's understandings. The dissenter must either accept the correction demanded by the leadership or face fatwas calling for abandonment and exclusion from the methodology—a well-known practice within the Salafi school.

The preceding analysis of the Salafi current's organizational structure and its methods of building trust and social solidarity suggests that Salafi thought remains faithful to its normative framework, which distinguishes between constants and variables. The centrality of jurisprudential and doctrinal authority is treated as a constant, whereas methods of religious propagation, the use of virtual space, and the diversity of activities across provinces are variables through which Salafism adapts its activities while protecting itself and preserving its cohesion. This differs from the Muslim Brotherhood, which has benefited from the variables of modern positive politics by organizing through parties, trade unions, and associations.

Section Two: The Organizational Structure of the Muslim Brotherhood Current and Formal Institutional Development

This section analyzes the organizational structure of the Muslim Brotherhood current in order to identify its configuration, institutional architecture, and methods of organizing party work within rigorous institutional frameworks.

1. The Organizational Structure of the Muslim Brotherhood

Organizational structure plays a significant role in realizing the Muslim Brotherhood's vision in practice through a hierarchical organization characterized by relative stability and slow change (Ben Sebaa, 2020/2021, p. 86). Alfred Chandler's concept of organizational structure refers to the organizational entity of an institution and appears in two dimensions:

first, the channels of hierarchical progression; and second, the data, information, and directives transmitted through those channels (Ben Sebaa, 2020/2021, p. 87). The Muslim Brotherhood uses organization as a principal instrument for realizing its ideas and embodying its principles in practice.

The Muslim Brotherhood also adopts a bureaucratic organizational model in the Mintzbergian sense. It is characterized by specialized operational tasks, with control and communication formalized at every organizational level, and by substantially centralized decision-making authority represented by the secretary-general, president, or executive council (Ben Sebaa & Boulqawas, 2021, pp. 333–334). At the same time, local activities remain decentralized, which explains the existence of offices at municipal, district, and provincial levels.

In sum, since its establishment the Muslim Brotherhood has rested on two pillars: the idea and the organization.

The Muslim Brotherhood holds that the structural organization of the Muslim community is legally permissible according to jurists and is supported by texts from the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah.

Qur'anic evidence includes the verses: "Hold firmly together to the rope of God and do not be divided" (Qur'an 3:103); "Cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression" (Qur'an 5:2); "Those who respond to their Lord, establish prayer, and conduct their affairs by mutual consultation" (Qur'an 42:38); and "Consult together in a fair manner" (Qur'an 65:6).

Evidence from the Prophetic Sunnah includes the Prophet's statement to Mu'adh ibn Jabal: "Adhere to the community of Muslims and their leader." When asked what to do if they had neither a community nor a leader, he replied: "Then keep away from all those factions, even if you must bite onto the root of a tree until death reaches you while you remain in that state" (reported in both Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim).

In a related sense, Shaykh Khalil states in his Mukhtasar: "The wife of a missing person may refer the matter to the judge, the governor, or the water official; otherwise, to the community of Muslims" (Khalil ibn Ishaq, 2005, p. 131). The intended meaning is that, in the absence of a judge, such matters are referred to the Muslim community (Al-Zawawi, n.d., p. 3).

In explaining why the Muslim Brotherhood organization was created, Imam Hasan al-Banna stated: "If you review the history of successful revivals among different nations, Eastern and Western, ancient and modern, you will find that those responsible for every revival that succeeded and bore fruit had a defined method by which they worked and a defined goal toward which they aimed. Those who called for renewal established that method and worked to realize it for as long as their lives and opportunities permitted. Review the history of

organizations and peoples, and you will see this statement clearly demonstrated” (Ahmad, 2014/2015, p. 247).

Shaykh Sa’id Hawwa considered the Muslim Brotherhood to embody, in the modern age, the Muslim community enjoined by Islam in the aforementioned hadith: “Adhere to the community of Muslims” (Hawwa, 1997, p. 31). He then offered a legal rationale for the group and for its structure, inspired by the caliphate system, to justify religiously the obligation to join it rather than any other organization. He relied on the Shafi’i position that, when no political caliph exists, the caliphate’s functions pass to the most learned person of the age (Hawwa, 1997, pp. 29–30). Hawwa further argued that Muslims’ neglect of organization and consultation had reduced them to weightless and unstable froth carried by a torrent (Hawwa, 1997, p. 36).

2. The Party’s Organizational Structure

Because the organizational structures of Algerian parties belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood current are almost identical, the discussion is limited to the structure of the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), as stipulated in its statutes.

Organizational Structure of the Movement

First, the Congress is the Movement’s highest body and comprises:

- A number or proportion of elected delegates.
- Members of the National Consultative Council.
- Heads of provincial offices and provincial consultative councils.
- National offices of institutions accredited by the National Consultative Council.
- Members of Parliament.
- A proportion of the presidents of provincial and municipal people’s assemblies who belong to the Movement.
- An additional 3% of the total congress membership, selected for seniority and competence and nominated by the National Executive Bureau.

Second, the National Consultative Council is the Movement’s highest authority between congresses and comprises:

- The legally recognized founders.
- Former presidents of the Movement.
- Five members selected from among the historical founders.
- The former president and two vice-presidents of the National Consultative Council, and former presidents of the Council.
- Members of the National Executive Bureau and serving members of the Bureau from the previous term through the Extraordinary Congress held on July 22, 2017.
- Government ministers.
- The head of the parliamentary group.

- Heads of provincial offices.
- An elected proportion of delegates from each province, in accordance with the electoral regulations.
- Between one and three representatives from every institution accredited by the National Consultative Council, with due consideration given to the student institution.
- Eight elected members representing the diaspora.
- Forty women elected by the congress delegates and allocated among the provinces at the Congress in accordance with the electoral regulations.
- Six serving parliamentarians, including one woman.
- Ten members with recognized expertise, proposed by the Movement's president in consultation with the vice-presidents and endorsed by the National Consultative Council.
- A special exceptional quota to accommodate possible cases of unification, regulated by the internal rules and approved by the National Consultative Council.

Third, the president of the Movement, the president of the National Consultative Council, and their vice-presidents.

Fourth, the National Executive Bureau is the highest executive body emanating from the National Consultative Council and comprises:

- The president of the Movement.
- Two vice-presidents of the Movement.
- The national secretary responsible for organization and digitalization.
- The national secretary responsible for elected officials and local development.
- The national secretary responsible for institutions and relations with civil society.
- The national secretary responsible for political and economic affairs.
- The national secretary responsible for education, capacity-building, and training.
- The national secretary responsible for media and communication.
- The national secretary responsible for women and family affairs.
- The national secretary responsible for administration, finance, and resources.
- The national secretary responsible for universities, student affairs, and youth work.
- The national secretary responsible for the diaspora and foreign relations.
- The national secretary responsible for Palestine, just causes, and human rights.
- The Bureau secretary.

Fifth, the local organizational bodies are:

- The Provincial Consultative Council.
- The Provincial Executive Bureau.
- The General Assembly.
- The Municipal Executive Bureau.

- The group office, composed of groups of members at the level of neighborhoods, villages, and remote areas.
- The family (*usra*), an organizational unit that performs the Movement's functions as defined by the internal rules (Movement of Society for Peace, 2018, art. 2).

From a jurisprudential perspective, the Muslim Brotherhood does not regard organization as a religious innovation. Rather, it considers organization a modern obligation under the legal maxim, "Whatever is necessary to fulfill an obligation is itself obligatory." Organization is therefore a necessary means of attaining the religious objectives pursued by the group, foremost among them the re-establishment of the Islamic caliphate and the application of Islamic law in every sphere of life. Shafi'i jurists have held that, when the office of the caliphate is vacant, its functions pass to the most learned person of the age (Klouchi, n.d., p. 302).

From a sociological perspective, this structure's strict hierarchy produces organic discipline among followers, leaving no room for spontaneity or individual decisions. Everyone—including the president of the Movement—is required to act in accordance with the organization's internal regulations and rules. This occurred when the Movement's former president, Dr. Bouguerra Soltani, relinquished a ministerial post following decisions by the Consultative Council opposing participation in the government.

3. Trade Unions, Associations, and Social and Political Networks

Although the Muslim Brotherhood began as an Islamic movement that rejected partisanship and division and called instead for a single-party system or a popular body working in the service of Islam—Imam Hasan al-Banna affirmed that Islam neither recognizes nor endorses partisanship (Al-Banna, n.d.-a, pp. 147, 167–168)—the Movement in Algeria developed broad extensions encompassing political parties, associations, trade unions, and other organizations, as discussed below.

Associations

In Muslim Brotherhood thought, associations are a means of realizing objectives and providing public services: building mosques, opening schools, establishing and managing clubs and teams, organizing celebrations of religious and national occasions and anniversaries, reconciling disputes, collecting donations from the wealthy and distributing them to eligible recipients, and disseminating values and principles (Al-Banna, n.d.-b, pp. 85–86). Accordingly, the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Algeria has organizational and volunteer arms operating through associations such as the Guidance and Reform Association, the Al-Baraka Association, and the Al-Ma'ali Association, among others.

The objectives of these associations may extend beyond solidarity and cooperation to closer engagement with society, the attraction of a larger number of sympathizers, and the strengthening of social trust.

Politically, Law No. 12-06 of January 12, 2012, on associations clearly sets out the conditions for establishing and joining associations and the procedures governing their activities (Ministry of the Interior, Local Authorities and Transport, n.d.). The law therefore prohibits the use of associations for political purposes, particularly during electoral periods.

Student and Trade Union Organizations

The student sphere has not been free of Muslim Brotherhood activity. The movement established student organizations ideologically aligned with Brotherhood thought, in which groups of students are elected by peers belonging to the same current. These formally organized structures operate in the university context to defend students' rights and improve their living conditions on campus and in university residences. The Free Student Union, present at numerous Algerian universities, is one organization with a Brotherhood background. It has served as a reservoir of skilled individuals who later became cadres within the structures of Brotherhood-oriented parties.

Because student organizations are a form of social movement, Albert Pillemer is regarded as a prominent sociologist who examined social movements, the role of individuals within communities, the impact of variables on social movements, and intergenerational relations (Abd al-Salam & Sufyan, 2025, p. 3). Social movements are defined as collective efforts aimed at changing established social relations; they are new projects seeking to establish a new way of life and expressing dissatisfaction with the prevailing pattern (Akdid, n.d., p. 16).

Alongside student organizations that exercise trade-union rights in the university sphere are unions established under the 1989 Constitution, Law No. 90-14 of 1990 on the exercise of trade-union rights, and Law No. 22-06 of 2022, which introduced new provisions in this area (Tawabti, 2022, p. 100).

These unions are associations formed by workers and employers to defend and advocate for their collective and individual interests (Tawabti, 2022, p. 103). They are occupational in character, unlike student unions, whose membership consists of students.

Trade-union activity in Algeria must be independent, as stipulated in Article 12 of Law No. 23-02. Independence means that unions must remain separate from political organizations or parties and may not receive financial support or privileges from them. This is intended to enable unions to function as genuine partners contributing to economic and social development (Khelifi, n.d.).

This position is reinforced by functionalist theory, which approaches unions through the tasks assigned to them and their relationship to the social realities in which they operate. Unions address wages and the consequences of work within institutions and seek to exercise their functions independently. In practice, however, the situation differs: some unions extend their activity into the political sphere because political discourse predominates in society (Izz

al-Din, 2020, pp. 26–27). A union's function also varies according to political orientation and the nature of the economic and social systems. In some institutions, experience has shown that individuals sharing a particular ideological background form a bloc to lead and manage the union and to draw closer to workers and professionals in the name of the current to which most union members belong. They thereby seek to shape professional consciousness and influence decisions in accordance with the general orientation of the current with which the union—or most of its members—is affiliated.

This argument is further supported by proponents of the ideological perspective, who maintain that the principal driving force of a union is the ideology adopted by its members and that they seek to realize and embody its ideas and principles. Unions worldwide are driven by revolutionary ideology. In the United States, the integration of unions into social life is clearly visible: they are deeply rooted in the life of enterprises and possess the capacity to resolve conflicts and exert pressure on officials and employers as interest groups. In Europe, union work is characterized by a separation between its technical dimension and its political and social dimensions. In developing countries, despite unions' efforts to represent workers and defend their rights, they remain associated with organizational models that are predominantly traditional.

Trade unions therefore cannot be studied apart from the ideologies that shape them (Izz al-Din, 2020, p. 29), nor in isolation from the composition of their membership and members' political and social affiliations.

In conclusion, the researcher observes that, in substantive terms, both the Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood currents in Algeria possess tightly regulated organizational structures that members and followers may neither violate nor leave. Within the Salafi current, a person who departs from the methodology is excluded through a fatwa issued by the leadership or by the shaykh to whom Salafis refer disputed questions. Within the Muslim Brotherhood current, a person who violates the rules or disobeys the organization is removed through an official document stating the reasons for terminating that person's service and withdrawing membership. Salafism withdraws affiliation through a fatwa; the Muslim Brotherhood withdraws membership through a formal decision. Ultimately, each current has an organization governed by rules and standards: the Salafi current is governed by an informal organization, while the Muslim Brotherhood is governed by a formal one.

In formal terms, the Salafi current rejects bureaucratic organization. It therefore does not permit affiliation with political parties, trade unions, or associations—except among a segment of Salafis who allow work through associations—and regards such frameworks as illegitimate means.

The Muslim Brotherhood current, by contrast, considers bureaucratic organization and institutionalization through parties, associations, and trade unions to be permissible

means and adaptable variables, provided that the objective is social reform; means take the ruling of their ends.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that both the Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood currents in Algeria possess structured and effective organizational systems, despite their substantial differences in form, legitimacy, and methods of operation. The analysis therefore challenges the assumption that rejecting formal organization necessarily implies the absence of organizational structure. Although the Salafi current rejects political parties, trade unions, and bureaucratic institutions as religiously illegitimate innovations, it functions through a highly cohesive informal network. Its structure is based on the authority of recognized shaykhs, the role of students of religious knowledge as intermediaries, shared doctrinal and behavioral norms, symbolic capital, and decentralized religious activities. Internal discipline is maintained through adherence to the accepted Salafi methodology, while exclusion is generally enacted through religious judgments and fatwas.

The Muslim Brotherhood current, by contrast, embraces formal and hierarchical organization as a legitimate and necessary means of achieving religious, social, and political objectives. Its institutional structure is regulated by statutes, consultative councils, executive bodies, and national and local offices. Its organizational influence also extends beyond the political party into associations, student organizations, trade unions, and civil-society networks. Membership, discipline, and exclusion are consequently regulated through official procedures and administrative decisions rather than primarily through informal religious authority.

The comparison reveals that the fundamental distinction between the two currents concerns the institutional form through which authority is exercised. Salafism is governed by an informal structure whose legitimacy derives from doctrinal authority, symbolic leadership, and collective religious identity. The Muslim Brotherhood is governed by a formal bureaucratic structure whose legitimacy is reinforced by written regulations, institutional hierarchy, consultation, and administrative procedures. Nevertheless, both models combine

central authority with decentralized activity and employ organizational mechanisms that preserve cohesion, regulate conduct, and reproduce collective identity.

Ultimately, the Algerian case shows that Islamic currents adapt their organizational structures to their doctrinal foundations and their interpretations of legitimate collective action. Salafism maintains continuity without formal institutionalization, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood uses institutionalization to expand its social and political presence. The difference between them is therefore not between organization and non-organization, but between two distinct organizational models: one informal, authority-centered, and doctrinally regulated; the other formal, hierarchical, and institutionally administered.

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