

The Ahmadis of Algeria: the government's most convenient security threat?

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Despite numbering in the few thousands, the followers of this branch of Islam have been branded a major security threat by the Algerian state. Now, they are facing both a crackdown and a propaganda war.

By Jacob Lindelöw Berntson

In the last six months, at least 70 individuals belonging to the Ahmadiyya sect of Islam have been arrested in Algeria. Mass arrests of Ahmadis seem to have commenced in early 2016, but took a more intense turn in July 2016 when Algerian authorities commenced a “dismantling procedure” of the group’s offices in Blida. According to some sources, this resulted in the arrest of hundreds of people.

On November, 20 Ahmadis were sentenced to prison in Skikda, and the following month 33 individuals were arrested in Sétif. In late February, there were reports of the group’s leader being arrested in Chlef. On 2 March the High Islamic Council of Algeria issued a fatwa calling for an end to “Ahmadi activities,” and on 13 March another 15 Ahmadis were arrested in Bejaïa.

As this has occurred, the Algerian government (or the *pouvoir* as the Algerians call it) has accused Ahmadiyya followers for promoting extremism and for practicing “suspect” and “foreign” religious rites.

What is peculiar with both the arrests and rhetoric is how sudden they have become commonplace. Although foreign media have shown little to no interest in Algeria’s Ahmadis, Algerian media now reports on new arrests virtually every week.



The Algerian government traces the presence of the Ahmadis in Algeria to the 1970s. So why has the group suddenly been seen as a security threat?

Persecuted in many countries

The Ahmadiyya movement was founded in Punjab in what was then British India in 1889. Its founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, believed that he had been divinely appointed as the Mahdi who would bring about the return of true “Islam.” Ahmadis’ belief that their founder was a prophet led many Islamic bodies and scholars to denounce them as heretics.

The movement has since spread to 209 countries, and the Ahmadis are persecuted in many of them. In Pakistan – home to the world’s largest Ahmadiyya community – they have officially been declared non-Muslims.

Ahmadis are seen as active proselytizers of their faith, which has led to accusations of them being “foreign agents” in many of the countries they operate in.

Even countries without majority Muslim populations have become the stage for religiously inspired hatred against the Ahmadis. In March 2016, an Ahmadi shopkeeper in Glasgow was murdered, with the killer defending his actions by saying that the shopkeeper though his faith had “disrespected” Islam.

Absurdly, when Mahershala Ali recently became the first black Muslim actor to win an Academy Award for his role in *Moonlight*, many congratulatory social media posts were deleted once it became clear that Ali is an Ahmadi. One such tweet came from Pakistan’s top diplomat to the UN.

Algeria joins the club

The Algerian government was notified of the Ahmadiyya “threat” as early as 2013. Mohamed Aissa, the Minister for Religious Affairs and Waqf (endowments), said at the time that several sects threatened peace and national cohesion, listing Ahmadiyya in the company of Salafism, Wahhabism, Takfirism, and Shi’ism, despite Ahmadis numbering according to most sources only around 1,000 people. Still, it took until 2016 for the government to take action against the group on a large scale, with Aissa appointing a special committee to manage the mass arrests of Ahmadis.

A propaganda war

The crackdown has been partnered with the *pouvoir*’s aggressively pushed narrative of the “danger” posed by Ahmadis in Algeria. The narrative has been advanced with the aid of the Algerian print media and has been legitimized by individuals within the religious and academic establishment testifying to the veracity of the Algerian state’s claims.

Accusations against the Ahmadis often imply (or explicitly state) that they are a threat to national security due to their “foreign connections”, as well as blaming them for embezzling funds or performing illegal financial dealings. One particularly conspiracy-laden theory is that Ahmadis abroad are actively encouraging their followers in Algeria to provoke confrontations with Algeria’s security forces.



It is important to note that Religious Affairs Minister Aissa and his supporters often emphasize Algeria's strong legislative commitment to religious freedom – which they say the Ahmadis are a threat against – and that the crackdown is necessary for exactly that reason. This way, it is painted as a legislative issue rather than a religious one.

Although the media does report on the recent rise in persecution of Ahmadis in Algeria, a majority of Algeria's outlets have functioned as government mouthpieces rather than human rights watchdogs.

Newspaper *Echourouk*, which is seen as close to the military, featured an interview with Djamel Ghoul, the President of the Autonomous Union of Imams and Religious Functionaries, in which he stated that the Ahmadis are supported by “British and Zionist intelligence.” *Ennahar*, also seen as close to the government, in October 2016 featured an in-depth piece claiming to reveal “the truth” about the Ahmadis in Skikda Province. The piece provided little evidence for its claim that the Ahmadis are “a network that can threaten national security,” besides accusations of illegal fundraising and by stating that the Ahmadis had physically assaulted a local imam.

Even privately owned *El-Khabar* seem to have embraced non-critical reporting, featuring an interview with Mascara University Professor Tibi Ghamri in which he claims that Ahmadis are a threat to Algeria's national identity, whilst simultaneously highlighting that this is an issue of legislation rather than religion (just like Minister Aissa would frame it).

A new low came when a branch of the Algerian Human Rights League (LADDH) in a press release claimed that the Ahmadis are the “necrosis” of Algerian society. The statement said that Ahmadis are targeting poor areas and that they are offering money and cars to people in order to proselytize them. This was reported on in an *El-Khabar* piece with the title “The Ahmadis make Algeria rot,” without criticizing the obvious fact that those are quite preposterous proclamations for a human rights organization to make.

Most articles reporting on the arrests of Ahmadis are short and do not provide much detail. Often, they just cite the arrest operation, followed by a sentence stating that Ahmadis constitute a threat. They never seem to contain a voice critical of the government's policy or Ahmadis themselves. The narrative is thus reliant as much on an omission of facts or details as it is on diffusion.

A convenient security threat?

Human rights activists in Algeria point to several reasons as to why the Ahmadis seem to have become the *pouvoir's* go-to public enemy. One is that the Algerian government is purposely trying to create a scarecrow to divert attention away from a stumbling economy and the fact that the state can no longer buy the public's support due to falling oil prices (which we wrote about last year).

Another one is that the government wants to create an urgent sense of menace ahead of the parliamentary elections in May. This seems, however, unnecessary, given that major opposition figure and 2014 presidential candidate Ali Benflis in January announced that his party would boycott the elections. Although other parties, including some Islamist ones, look to participate, few observers predict that the government and security apparatus will allow any major upsets for ruling party FLN (National Liberation Front) in the elections.



Regardless of whether such explanations hold water, this follows a familiar pattern of instrumentalizing religion as a dividing force in Algeria. Accusations made against the Ahmadis were previously hurled at Algeria's tiny Shia community, but as relations between Algeria and majority Shia Iran have improved, this seems to have stopped.

Similarly, the notion that Ahmadiyya is foreign to Algeria's national and religious identity is an old trick in the *pouvoir*'s manual. After seeing an uprising by armed Islamist groups turn into a decade-long civil war in the 1990s, Algeria has had a troubled relationship to politically organized Islam. The regime has opted to tout its own religious credentials and denounced both ultra-conservative or hard-line interpretations of Islam as concepts foreign to Algeria, despite reality pointing to another conclusion. Excluding the Ahmadis from the national religious community again follows this pattern of the government narrowly defining nationhood based on a state-sanctioned version of "true" Islam.

Simultaneously, the Algerian state seeks to legitimize such views by relying on statements on either influential (and government friendly) domestic religious bodies – as seen with the Islamic Supreme council's fatwa – or by referring to Cairo-based al-Azhar's denunciation of Ahmadis as non-Muslims.

Regardless of why Ahmadis are being targeted, the truth is that we are likely to see further infringements on the group's rights. Not only are security forces arresting Ahmadis themselves, but even people who speak up for them in public run the risk of being arrested. French lawyer Asif Arif, himself an Ahmadi, has offered to facilitate a meeting between Algeria's Ahmadi community and Mohamed Aissa, but Aissa has so far declined.

Sadly, Algeria are facing several actual threats. These include a declining economy and the ever-present risk of terror attacks from groups present both within the country and along its borders. Rather than presenting imaginary scarecrows, the *pouvoir* should make sure to include its entire population to fight future dangers.

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