The UGEMA generation of Algeria’s civilian leadership
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ABSTRACT
Based on the published interviews of a sample of 33 former student leaders and members of the Union Générale des Etudiants Musulmans Algériens (UGEMA, 1955–1963), along with private interviews or other data collected about an additional 30, this article traces the brief history of the Algerian Revolution’s only autonomous NGO and the consequent patterns of cooperation and competition over subsequent years. The sample represents a broad political spectrum of Algeria’s recently retired civilian elite. It is biased towards students who eventually achieved high office. Elected leadership positions in UGEMA seem to have anticipated subsequent promotions and co-optation by Bouredienne’s regime (1965–1978) more than by Ben Bella’s (1962–1965). But unwilling or unable in the course of their careers to act in concert, this French-educated elite never acquired real authority. Its representative organ, UGEMA, was effectively ‘suicided’ in 1961, the summer before external military forces outgunned those of Algeria’s Provisional Government and seized power. For better or worse, UGEMA’s potential civilian leadership remained hostage to competing military factions. It was also seriously divided, its captains of industry opposed to Arabizing educators. Shutting down its only autonomous intermediary left independent Algeria with a weak, politically impoverished state.

KEYWORDS Algeria; Union Générale des Etudiants Musulmans Algériens (UGEMA); Ahmed Ben Bella; Houari Boumedienne

Introduction

Within nine months of its July 1955 founding, the Union Générale des Etudiants Musulmans Algériens (UGEMA) declared itself to be a ‘combat unit [unité de combat] of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN)’. It joined forces with the FLN in fighting French colonial occupation by vigorously implementing the FLN’s global diplomacy and by calling an unlimited strike to legitimate its armed resistance and encouraging students to join it. As the Paris representative of the US National Student Association, I met some of its leaders in the fall of 1957, when the FLN leadership called off the strike, enabling them to return to university. We kept up friendships over the years, and the organisers of the 50th anniversary of UGEMA’s founding invited me and others from USNSA to
attend their conference in Tlemcen. They further assisted me in assembling the sample of their members and associates that is analysed in this paper.\footnotemark[1]

Consequently, this slice of UGEMA student leaders and members is inevitably biased towards the elite. The 33 core members whose interviews were published (Henry 2012) included 5 of the 26 ‘intellectuals’ recorded in William Quandt’s classic study of Algeria’s political elite, 1954–1968, and one of his ‘maquisards’, Belkacem Cherif (Quandt 1970, 284–285), who had represented UGEMA students in Morocco in 1956. I further supplemented it with other students of their generation (born 1928–1940) who were not members of UGEMA during its short years of operation in Algeria and France (1955–1958, 1962–1963) or overseas (1955–1963). I also included two members whom I could not interview but who were key leaders of UGEMA, the late Mohammed Khemisti (1930–1963) and the late Mohammed Sedik Benyahia (1932–1982). They were subjects of conversations with many of their associates and their career trajectories and demographic data are matters of public record.\footnotemark[2] The bias of my sample (n = 63) is skewed towards ministers and other high officials, even those, like Zohra Drif-Bitat, who had deliberately avoided any association with UGEMA. Also not interviewed but well known were two long-serving ministers, Dahou Ould Kabla and Smail Hamdani, who had been members not only of UGEMA but also of another interesting elite segment, the late Abdelhamid Boussouf’s Ministry of Armaments and Communications (MALG), a major power centre during Algeria’s War of Liberation.

Despite its limitations, the sample offers some quantitative as well as qualitative insights into Algeria’s political and administrative elite. First, there is the distinction noted by Nacer Djabi of ‘political’ versus ‘technocrat’ ministers (2015). Fortunately, our sample included major political figures of independent Algeria such as Belaid Abdesselam, Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahim, and Redha Malek as well as many so-called technocrats. Given, too, that the sample includes 24 achievers of ministerial rank, regional distributions of power can be analysed. So also can relationships between the ‘technocrats’ and their educational backgrounds. In this paper, I will present the bare quantitative data as background to the larger picture of UGEMA’s contribution to Algerian politics. The all too brief history of this autonomous student movement anticipated Algeria’s subsequent political development, and its political tenors articulated the tensions between Algeria’s industrial, cultural, and agrarian revolutions promoted in the 1970s, UGEMA’s decade of power under Boumedienne.

Identifying a political elite

The recorded reminiscences of its veterans, published elsewhere (Henry 2012), offer windows for viewing this generation of Algeria’s civilian
leadership. Among them is a third former prime minister (along with Abdesselam and Malek), Sid Ahmed Ghozali, and a total, including Taleb-Ibrahimi, of 24 ministers. These individuals are also emblematic of broad lines of policy: Abdesselam and Ghozali represent Algeria’s failed industrialisation effort built on hydrocarbons, Taleb-Ibrahimi, the quest for cultural authenticity, and Redha Malek, the philosophic pursuit of revolutionary ideals. Also included are people like the late Belkacem Cherif, once Boumediene’s number two, whose principal role as a student leader had been to transmit orders from Morocco in late 1956 to sustain the UGEMA strike (discussed below) despite opposition among some of the students.

Formal titles and length of time served as minister do not necessarily indicate political power. One former student leader recalled that he had exercised more real power as secretary general of a key ministry than after being promoted to be CEO of a public institution and finally given ministerial status (Henry 2012, 490). Sometimes, too, offers of high posts were too good to turn down: a refusal could lead instead to jail and worse (Benfoldi 2015, 3).°

Years of serving as minister bore some relationship to political power, however, as the reader may infer from the Table 1, which presents the years and dates of first year in office of those who served as minister for more than two years.

The three top performers, Taleb, Abdesselam, and Benyahia, clearly were ‘political’ ministers by background and personal history. They came to power in the mid-1960s, after Colonel Boumediene ‘straightened out’ the revolution by removing Ben Bella from power. Already in August 1962, Ben Bella had in fact purged two of them, Abdesselam and Benyahia, from the original list of FLN nominees to Algeria’s Constituent Assembly. Two of the others he purged, Djamel Houhou and Redha Malek, also appear in Table 1; and another former UGEMA president, Messaoud Ait Chaalal, eventually made minister for less than a year, was not only eliminated in 1962 but subsequently jailed and tortured, along with Taleb, for allegedly supporting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministers</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>First year</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Retirement</th>
<th>Age retired</th>
<th>Age fired</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>16</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>55</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
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<td>15</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djamel Ould-Abbes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>79</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dahou Ould Khabla</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1975</td>
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<td>1977</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>54</td>
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<td>Layachi Yaker</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>6</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Redha Malek</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>75</td>
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Algerian dissidents. Clearly, Ben Bella’s regime did not welcome UGEMA’s top
elite, whereas Boumedienne recruited them and worked effectively with them (cf. Quandt 1970, 285).

Table 1 also gives the year each minister retired, along with his age at the
time of retirement. A final column offers another way of distinguishing ‘political’
ministers from ‘technocratic’ or time-serving ones. Those who were dis-
missed and subsequently returned to high office may be viewed as the
political ones. After Boumedienne’s death in late 1978, for instance, a
number of his leading ministers were purged, notably, Abdeselam and
Ghozali. Others of the 1977 generation also lost their positions in the transi-
tion to the presidency of Chadli Bendjedid, only to return subsequently to
power. Redha Malek, minister of information in Boumedienne’s final
cabinet, resumed his diplomatic career as an ambassador and even serving
as mediator between Iran and the United States to secure the U.S. hostages
release in 1981. But he, too, was dismissed to early retirement before being
recalled in 1992 to head a Consultative Assembly after the military suspended
the parliamentary elections and accepted President Bendjedid’s resignation.
Discontinuous ministerial status, in short, distinguished some of the political
ministers from the technocrats or timeservers. If a political minister is
defined as one with an independent policy agenda, discontinuity is the
rule. The exceptions were Benyahia, who, by all accounts, was an extremely
astute political operator as well as the only minister who dared ‘speak up’
to Boumedienne (see Henry 2012, 495), and Taleb-Ibrahimi, possibly sheltered
by his diplomatic and cultural vocations from more controversial economic
and social matters.

In addition to Belkacem Cherif, who was definitely ‘political’, a key member
of the Oujda Group that used Ben Bella’s historic legitimacy to seize power
and subsequently get rid of him, the other political ministers by virtue of
their longevity were Taleb, Abdesselam, and Benyahia. Abdesselam, along
with Ghozali, Houhou, and Malek, had the additional political distinction of
having been purged, then returned to high office. Of these six ‘political’ min-
isters, only one had not held office in UGEMA: Sid Ahmed Ghozali. Born in
1937, he was too young to have been involved in student politics before
the UGEMA strike of 1956. In 1958, he turned down a UGEMA scholarship
abroad in favour of staying in France, where the FLN had established an
alternative student structure, the Section Universitaire of the FLN Federation
of France. A brilliant math student, Ghozali invested in an additional year of
study to enter a French ‘grande école’ for engineering. His role in student poli-
tics was so modest that Djabi (2007, 87) defined him as part of the post-revo-
lutionary generation. Five years his senior, Taleb-Ibrahimi also had a relatively
apolitical academic upbringing. Despite being the first president of UGEMA,
he had remained relatively aloof, unlike Abdesselam, Benyahia, and Malek,
from the politicking behind it and behind his selection as president (discussed
further below). These three were part of the hard core of UGEMA that Ben Bella had identified in 1962. The honorary ‘father’ of UGEMA proclaimed at their 1960 congress was none other than Belaid Abdesselam.

Regionalism?

From Day One, 1 November 1954, the Algerian Revolution rejected the legitimacy of any intermediary body that the Front of National Liberation did not control. Members of previous nationalist parties or associations were not permitted to join as collective groups, only as individuals. Reformist nationalists also rejected other traditional intermediaries such as tribes and religious orders. For reasons to be discussed below, UGEMA itself nonetheless survived as a relatively autonomous organisation until August 1961, whereas the FLN constituted various satellite organisations for labour, merchants, youth, women, and the like before and after independence. In revolutionary Algeria’s world of disintermediated politics, the only surviving markers of identity were one’s family and geographic roots. Within any non-local association formed by the revolutionary authority informal regional ties inevitably surfaced.

Within UGEMA, the only other sort of representation was by university location, originally the University of Algiers or other universities across the French mainland. After it was dissolved in France in January 1958 and its national office moved from Paris to Lausanne, its members were scattered outside France and represented again by their respective universities and countries. Where a student studied, however, was less interesting than his or her regional family origins. Within our sample, biased in favour of student leaders, the geographic origins of the leaders could be compared with those of the somewhat smaller rank and file. Table 2 shows a reasonable spread of members’ birthplaces across the country but, comparing officers to non-officers, an apparent overrepresentation in the leadership of students coming from the Eastern part of Algeria.

But the more interesting finding concerns the Kabyles, who seem underrepresented in UGEMA’s leadership. They constitute 37% of the rank and file but only 18% of union’s officers and some 15% of the general population. This reversal seems a far cry from Jean Morizot’s study, published in 1962, of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>East</th>
<th>Kabylie</th>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>West</th>
<th>South</th>
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<td>Officer</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>18.2%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-officer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23.3%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
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</table>
L’Algérie kabylisée, showing substantial majorities of Kabyles in positions requiring education, such as schoolteachers and civil servants. By the late 1950s, French efforts to spread education to the ‘French Muslims’ had led to spectacular increases in secondary school students, who were finally entering university. Any earlier Kabyle majority rapidly became a minority more proportionate to the general population. Kabyles still constituted almost 27% of our sample, almost double that of the general population, but they seem not to have fared well in student elections. Nevertheless, UGEMA’s two top leaders, Belaid Abdessalam and Messaoud Ait Chaalal, were both Kabyles with ancestral origins in neighbouring Jurjura villages of the Iboudra-ren that displayed some of the most complex forms of local democracy practised in the mountains (Henry 2012, 101,397; Roberts 2014, 57–59). Abdessalam, more than any other ageing student leader, was the brain behind the creation of UGEMA, and Ait Chaalal was his brilliant successor who conserved the democratic institutions of the student union as long as was possible under the supervision of shifting FLN factions. It is as if politics were in the genes of these two student leaders.

The findings concerning regional bias should be put in perspective. Despite many student lives lost in the course of the Algerian Revolution (1954–1962), more Algerians were educated in universities across the world during this period than in the entire previous century of colonial occupation. At the outbreak of the Revolution on 1 November 1954, ‘there were … 354 lawyers; 165 doctors, pharmacists and dentists; 350 public servants (including 185 secondary school teachers); a hundred or so officers in the French army, and fewer than 30 engineers’ (El-Kenz 1991, 12). There were only 589 students studying at the University of Algiers, including some Tunisians, and perhaps 300 in France (Pervillé 2004, 22, 30,133).4 By the end of the war, 2288 Algerians were studying in France, an additional 1317 at the University of Algiers and its annexes in Oran-Tlemcen and Constantine, and a further 926 on UGEMA-FLN scholarships across the world, including 44 in the USA and 48 in the USSR (Henry 2012, 32). Even that UGEMA fraction of 926 students outnumbered the pre-revolutionary generations of university graduates.

Most of the 4000 students would complete their studies after independence and become cadres in the government or state-owned enterprises. Dissolved by the French government in January 1958 and forced to move overseas, UGEMA only nominally represented students studying inside Algeria and France. Somewhat older, however, our elite segment reflects the patterns of regional recruitment at higher levels that prevailed after independence.

A telling example was Mohammed Khemisti, UGEMA’s international affairs vice president, who was arrested shortly before I arrived in Paris. He remained incarcerated until 1961, but he then played a pivotal role as a trusted adviser to his fellow villager from Maghnia, Ahmed Ben Bella. Even before becoming
Algeria’s first foreign minister, he did much to protect his fellow students and alleviate Ben Bella’s fears of disloyalty among his intellectual superiors. Many of the UGEMA officers who had propagated the Algerian national cause through both Communist- and Western-controlled student conferences made a successful transition from the Algerian Provisional Government to its victorious antagonist, the Ben Bella regime. Despite being associated during the war with the Algerian Provisional Government that Ben Bella successfully opposed in the summer of 1962, Mohammed Benyahia gracefully worked with competing factions to draft the Tripoli Program and then, being one of UGEMA’s leaders supported by Foreign Minister Khemisti, became ambassador to Moscow in 1963. Within our sample, 10 UGEMA veterans made the successful transition in 1962–1963 to independent Algeria’s diplomatic service. They included such luminaries, in addition to Benyahia, as Lakhdar Brahim, Redha Malek, and Djammal Houhou. At least one of my UGEMA friends, despite a distinguished career in government, regretted having pursued his studies only to lose out on a diplomatic career by returning after Khemisti’s assassination in April 1963. Efforts failed in 1964, however, to develop an informal political advisory club of former UGEMA members in the foreign ministry, and Benyahia resigned as ambassador to the USSR in 1964 when Ben Bella, visiting Moscow, ignored him.5

The broader picture of regionalism under Algeria’s successive presidencies is exemplified in our sample of 24 ministers. Table 3 presents its geographic origins. Any bias in favour of student leaders coming from the East vanishes after 1979. Under Ben Bella, who comes from Maghnia in the Far West, power was shared with his military supporters of the so-called Oujda Group, named after the training grounds of Wilaayat 5 on the Moroccan side of the border that constituted the original nucleus of Algeria’s standing army of the frontiers. The only other Westerner in our sample to serve as minister in one of his governments was Sid Ahmed Ghozali, who came from a village near Nedroma. The Easterners were Mouloud Belhaouane, UGEMA’s second president, who became a secretary as well as member of the Constituent

<table>
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<th>Region</th>
<th>East</th>
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<td>Ben Bella (1962–1965)</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<td>Boumedienne (1965–1978)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td></td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benjedid (1979–1992)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>67%</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Bouteflika (1999–)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>23.8%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
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Assembly before briefly assuming the post of information minister, and a key member of the Oujda Group, Belkacem Cherif. He came from Ain Beida (Oum El Bouaghi), in the heart of the triangle of the wilayas of Batna, Tebessa and Souk Ahras (BTS). This area would be the prime recruiting ground for political leadership after 1980, but none of our UGEMA student leaders from the East made it into Chadly’s ruling circles.

With a tighter hold on power than Ben Bella, Boumediene seemed less prone to regional bias although he, coming from Guelma (just slightly north of the triangle), and Cherif, his number two, personified the BTS. In recruiting UGEMA’s principal political actors, he sought technical expertise rather than geographic representation. But before analysing the technical expertise of the UGEMA ministers, it can be observed from Table 3 that the two long-serving ministers recruited by Bouteflika after he became president in 1999 came from his home region. They also appear in Table 1.

**Technocratic expertise?**

In a sense, it was Ben Bella rather than Boumediene who made the most ‘perfect’ selection of a minister by virtue of his educational qualification by appointing Sid Ahmed Ghozali as minister of public works upon his graduation from the Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées. Career experience was not an option in 1964, when Algeria had so few engineers of any sort or experienced managers of any sort. By the 1970s, however, ministers were either ‘political’ or ‘technocrat’, and if the technocrats were not as well formed as those of subsequent generations, they were still what an Algerian sociologist of organisations likes to call ‘the engineers of UGEMA’ (Bouguerou 2015, 4). In our sample, most of them had some time before becoming minister to acquire some experience exercising a career. What sorts of education and career credentials did they have upon becoming minister? And what sorts of experience had UGEMA offered to propel them forward in their career, notably in diplomacy?

Serving as an officer of UGEMA during Algeria’s War of Liberation often required student leaders to represent UGEMA abroad or engage in other political activities, such as trying, at least before UGEMA’s dissolution, to convince French public opinion of the justice of Algeria’s cause. In Paris, the FLN even had some of the students persuading Algerian Muslim notables to resign from official positions in protest against colonial violence. Many of the former students I interviewed, including one woman who had served a UGEMA delegation to Prague as an interpreter because she studied English, attended international conferences and congresses across the globe. In the 1950s and 1960s, in fact, the Cold War had activated major student and youth activities both for propagating and for combatting international Communism. In the course of establishing UGEMA, nationalist students had energetically
opposed sympathisers of the French Communist Party, which had adopted a position opposed to Algeria’s Muslim national identity. Consequently, the US National Student Association enjoyed good relations with UGEMA and eventually raised substantial scholarship funds (Paget 2015, 196–206).

The subsequent career trajectories of our sample reflect their wartime experiences. Many of the students subsequently became diplomats but also pursued other activities in the course of their careers. To return to Ghozali, for instance, he served only briefly as minister of public works before becoming the CEO of the Société Nationale pour la Recherche, la Production, le Transport, la Transformation, et la Commercialisation des Hydrocarbures (SONATRACH). Eventually, he was shifted to diplomacy and served as Algeria’s foreign minister. As Table 4 indicates, studying engineering propelled students into careers in nascent Algerian industry, whether or not they had served as student leaders in UGEMA. Although neither Abdesselam nor Ghozali, the founders of SONATRACH, had academic training as petroleum engineers, many UGEMA students, especially those on scholarship to the United States, were encouraged to study petroleum engineering, including two in our sample. But whatever else they studied, the student leaders were far more likely than other students to devote their careers principally

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 4. Career trajectories.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Military</td>
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</table>
to diplomacy. Almost half of them became career diplomats, compared to only 7% of rank and file students. If they had studied medicine, they were still unlikely to make it a career, whether or not they completed their studies. While Abdesselam had been so involved in politics that he was a perennial first-year medical student, all three of UGEMA’s presidents indeed completed medical school, but they became too wrapped up in other careers to develop their practices. As noted earlier, Ben Bella so distrusted Taleb-Ibrahim (2006, 184–187) for preferring to practise medicine rather than serve his government that he jailed him. He also jailed his fellow medical student and eventual successor as president of UGEMA, Messaoud Ait Chaalal, who was also practising medicine and even seeking an internship in the United States to pursue a medical career. Only two out of UGEMA’s eight former medical student leaders, one of whom was a woman, managed to have medical careers. Of the other six medical students in the sample who had not been student leaders, three did manage to practise medicine.

Most of the medical students who did not practise went on to become ministers, but their expertise bore little relationship to the ministry for which they were called. Two of the political ministers, Abdesselam and Taleb-Ibrahim, had a medical background. Of the six remaining ministers in the sample having a medical background, beginning with Mohammed Khemisti, only one ever served a ministry related to the health sciences. For many years, Dr. Djamel Ould-Abbes served President Bouteflika as minister of ‘National Solidarity’, a ministry that dispensed health among various other benefits (see the official website). As for the others, positions as spokesmen or information officers bore more relationship to the incumbent’s past experience as a student leader or diplomat than to any medical training. Lamine Khène, the non-practising physician who served President Boumedienne as minister of public works, had acquired any relevant technical skills from chairing a Franco-Algerian technical organisation to develop the Sahara. No medically trained ‘UGEMA engineer’ ever became minister of health, although Abdesselam, the perennial first-year medical student, became Boumedienne’s czar of Algerian industry.

Experience as a student leader seemed primarily mediated through diplomacy that in turn led to top ministerial positions. Careers in industry or diplomacy apparently offered better opportunities to become a minister than a career in public administration, private practice, or culture and education. Many in the sample, coming from a generation of chaos and rapid change, really did not follow a standard career. Some of the politicians were especially hard to classify as they crossed different categories in the course of their careers. Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahim, for instance, is coded here as having a career as educator, although he, too, could have been classified as a diplomat if not a medical practitioner after his brief unfortunate effort to lead an independent life. Had he been coded as a diplomat, Table 5 would have shown
Table 5. Percentage Minister by student leadership and career.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career</th>
<th>Student leader (%)</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Other (%)</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>All (%)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diplomatic</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

that the diplomats in the sample, whether or not they had served as leaders of UGEMA, had a precisely 50–50 chance of becoming a minister. But the more important point is that 15 or almost half of the UGEMA student leaders became diplomats, compared to only 2 outside the select circle.

Table 5 also shows that the captains of industry in the sample stood the same 50–50 chance to become minister as the diplomats, whether or not they had served as student leaders, and also that those with a UGEMA leadership background were twice as numerous. These early industrialists, however, tended not to be engineers so much as UGEMA associates from other disciplines whom Abdesselam would subsequently recruit. Among the twelve in the sample, only five were engineers, and of these, only two, including Ghozali, became minister.

Anticipating revolutionary divisions

Whether politician or technocrat, only three of the ministers had a bilingual education. While 11 out the 63 in the entire sample qualified as bilingual, having received secondary education from medersas or Islamic institutes, such background does not seem to have boosted their chances of high office. UGEMA, especially its leadership, may best be viewed today as the cream of a French-educated elite that was unable to connect with social forces, much less articulate a collective vision. They remain casualties of colonial devastation that gave rise to a very small, dependent elite cut off from culturally as well as economically pauperised masses. Barely 14% of the population was literate in 1954, and one-quarter of these only in Arabic, leaving French-educated elites with a very small potential audience. Isolated during the Revolution from most incoming students, UGEMA could never fill the ideological vacuum that Malek (1991, 139), one of its founders, observes to be the ‘original sin’ of the FLN. Unlike the Union Générale des Etudiants Tunisiens, UGEMA never enjoyed the political insulation of a parent ruling party. Individuals such as Malek and Benyahia contributed to the official texts of the Revolution, such as the Tripoli Charter of June 1962, but visions of building industrial society contradicted those of restoring Algeria’s cultural heritage. The ‘empty shell’ of revolutionary ideology was in Malek’s words ‘a political
choice’, not for lack of texts or intellectual turpitude but for refusing to ‘make them the living elements of reflection and … ideological struggle’ (140; see Hashemaoui 2013, 65). Within its leadership, UGEMA reflected many competing tendencies but lost any potential to serve as a platform to articulate them in debate. While the student union was the Revolution’s first and only autonomous NGO, outside forces destroyed it before independence, and the ruling party remained an empty shell. Yet, it had enjoyed real autonomy and might have articulated those differences in the sort of continuing ‘living reflection’ of ideological differences that Malek advocated to sustain Algeria’s revolution.

First, concerning its autonomy, UGEMA should not be confused with the other national organisations founded in 1956 by the FLN as satellite organisations. A trade unionist once told UGEMA President Ait Chaalal how his Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens differed from UGEMA: ‘You were elected!’ From the outset of the Revolution, veteran Algerian labour leadership was denied a voice (Djabi 2005, 211), whereas students proudly carried on with traditions of association dating back to the founding of in 1919 of an Amicale and then Association des Etudiants Musulmans de l’Afrique du Nord (AEMAN) (Henry 2012, 60; Pervillé 2004, 47). Representing students at the University of Algiers, AEMAN held annual elections that were hotly contested in the early 1950s by students, some of whom political parties had already recruited in high school. In 1952, discussions were already underway to create a North African student union, tentatively titled the Union Musulmane des Etudiants du Maghreb, to include students studying in France and supersede their Association des Etudiants Musulmans Nord Africains (AEMNA) as well as AEMAN.

When, instead, the Tunisians followed their political leadership to form the Union Générale des Etudiants Tunisiens, some sort of Algerian student union seemed inevitable and was only delayed in 1953 because of a scission within Algeria’s dominant nationalist party, the Mouvement pour la Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques (MTLD), between its founder Messali Hadj and its Central Committee, to which Belaid Abdesselam was elected representing the youth in 1953. However, his party lost the University of Algiers student elections in the fall of 1953 to a coalition of Communists and rival nationalist parties. Meanwhile, in Paris, a more broadly based coalition of students founded the Union des Etudiants Algériens de Paris. By 1 November 1954, the outbreak of the Algerian Revolution, the pro-MTLD students had already regained control of AEMAN in Algiers, and in early 1955, Abdesselam, now in Paris, urged his allies in Algiers to issue a call for a national union of students. As Khène, then in Algiers, recalls: ‘There was an evolutionary process leading up to the formation of UGEMA before that of the FLN’ (Henry 2012, 96).

Secondly, UGEMA indeed developed a capacity to deliberate and overcome deep ideological divisions among students. During spring vacation, a
major battle ensued between the students sympathetic to the MTLD calling for a Union Générale des Etudiants Musulmans Algériens and those led by the Communists who favoured UGEA as a union open to all Algerians, whatever their religion. Rédha Malek recalls this ‘Battle of the M’ as marking his generation’s finest hours of political debate. Was Algeria to be open to everyone committed to self-determination, exclusively to Muslims, or to some definition of citizenship that included some inhabitants but excluded others? The point to note here, however, is that the students made their own decision about national identity. The critical push for UGEMA came from the students themselves, not from the FLN or any other external force, at least none other than the perennial first-year medical student, who had served on the Central Committee of the Mouvement pour la Triomphe des Libertés Démocratique (MTLD). In addition to Belaid Abdesselam, the most effective champions of the ‘M’ were Malek and Benyahia.

By the time UGEMA convened its first congress in July 1955, the FLN possibly influenced the outcome of its first election. From Algiers, Ramdane Abane, released from jail in late January, was organising the Revolution, while Boudiaf laid the foundations for the FLN Federation of France with former MTLD activists. In the course of my research, several claimed the honour having selected Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahim as president. The late Dr. Belaouane insisted that he had convinced Abdesselam to select him (Henry 2012, 273), and Abdesselam himself told me that Taleb was his own choice, shared with Mohammed Benyahia, Redha Malek, Lamine Khene, and others, without any FLN input (Henry 2012, 125). Salih Benkobbi, who became secretary of the Algiers section of UGEMA, insisted that it was Benyahia’s idea, then seconded in Algiers by the FLN leader Ramdane Abane. On the other hand, Doum (1992, 2013, 104), one of Boudiaf’s founders of the Federation of France, claimed that he had a hand in the selection process. Taleb himself recalls: ‘It is undeniable that I had the confidence of congress delegates and was elected by my friends from UGEMA. But you need to sense the atmosphere at the time: the FLN was behind it …’ (Henry 2012, 224).

Unlike Ait Chaalal, Taleb saw no significant difference between UGEMA and the UGTA or other satellite associations of the FLN founded during the war. Taleb, however, was not an active student politician before being elected president of UGEMA, and he left his position after six months to work full time for the FLN until he was arrested in February 1957. Ait Chaalal, on the other hand, was a founding member who became president in December 1957 and remained in charge until August 1961, when external efforts to control the union could no longer be resisted. The break-up of UGEMA anticipated the wars within the Algerian Revolution in the summer of 1962.

One test of the hypothesis that UGEMA enjoyed relative autonomy was the famous student strike, alluded to earlier, of 19 May 1956. Benkobbi claimed that the FLN had planned and ordered it, whereas Lamine Khène insists
that the students in Algiers spontaneously decided to order it after word had reached them, later proven to be unfounded, of the murder of a fellow student. Khène was the senior student leader, vice president of AEMAN during the previous school year, who chaired the meetings that decided the strike; like Benyahia, he was also directly involved with the FLN leadership. Once the students in Algiers declared the strike, the FLN leadership immediately supported the decision, and Khène recalls receiving the order to launch it before awaiting formal approval of the Executive Committee of UGEMA situated in Paris. He nevertheless insists that it was the students, without any orders from the FLN, who decided in favour of the unconditional strike (Henry 2012, 98–99; see Benkobbi 2002, 69–72).\footnote{11}

Not only had UGEMA acquired relative autonomy; this elite of former French university students also reflects the major political forces at work in Algeria until the 1990s, when the violence following the cancellation of elections in January 1992 spelled the end of any political dialogue. Had UGEMA’s traditions of democratic representation and debate survived independence, they might have moderated the country’s extreme shifts in policy that led to political disasters just as this generation was reaching its political maturity, its average age being just 45 in 1978, the year of Boumedienne’s death.

**The sources of controversy**

Long before being faced in 1968 as minister of education with a university student strike against his Arabisation policies, Taleb-Ibrahimi twice in his *Lettres de prison* reminded Messaoud Ait Chaalal, his fellow medical student, of the importance of Algeria’s Arab heritage. In a letter dated 2 September 1958, he congratulated him for the work of the previous UGEMA congress but asked him to have UGEMA insist, ‘as Algerians, on the importance of Arabizing education in independent Algeria’. On 6 August 1960, his tone became more insistent, ‘being surprised [on reading *Le Monde*] to find no allusion to Algeria as belonging to the Arab-Muslim world’ in the resolutions of UGEMA’s Fourth Congress and berating it for only mentioning the Arab countries to criticise the inadequacy of their assistance to the Algerian cause: ‘Your duty at UGEMA is double: to form cadres … and to define Algerian culture’(Taleb-Ibrahimi 2001, 35, 111). In fact, the Fourth Congress, held near Tunis in the final week of July 1960, had passed a cultural resolution citing ‘the Arab-Islamic character of our national culture’ and calling on UGEMA’s Executive Committee to send ‘a possible larger number of students’ to study in the Arab world (*IVe congrès* 1960, 70). Yet, UGEMA was already on the defensive, not ready to urge sending ‘as many as possible’ to Arab countries. One of its Executive Committee members who, being bilingual, had been tasked to integrate into UGEMA the Algerians studying in Egypt and the Arab East, did not seek re-election in 1960. The two former Cairo
students presenting their memoirs were too tactful to criticise his highhanded
tactics but they expressed pride in the associations they had already founded
in Cairo and Baghdad (Henry 2012, 593–605).

Two of UGEMA’s founders, Malek and Benyahia, further promoted the
cause of Arabisation as principal authors of the Tripoli Program of June
1962: ‘Algerian culture shall be national, revolutionary, and scientific … . Its
primary role will be to restore to the Arabic language, the very expression
of our country’s cultural values, its dignity and effectiveness as a language
of civilization … . It will combat cultural cosmopolitanism … .’ The Program
called for the Arabisation of Algeria’s educational system ‘on a scientific
basis, noting that it was a “delicate task” that could not be accomplished pre-
cipitously without sacrificing an entire generation’ (Flory and Miège 1962, 696,
702). Would Taleb have agreed? He claimed in 2007 that its precipitation had
resulted not from his years as education minister (1965–1968) but from the
previous minister’s decision rapidly to expand education and Ben Bella’s
decision to hire one thousand Egyptians.\footnote{12}

In any event, the Arabisation policies applied in Algeria were in serious con-

cflict with the other policies of state-led industrial development for which the
UGEMA leadership was better known. The Tripoli Program had also antici-
pated industrial development, but more as afterthought, coming only in
fifth place after agrarian revolution, the development of infrastructure, the
nationalisation of credit and commerce, and the nationalisation of energy
and mining resources (Tripoli 1962, 701). Major changes in the countryside
were viewed as a precondition, to generate the necessary demand for indus-
trial products. The UGEMA generation was hardly monolithic, despite being
seen later as ‘dinosaurs’ committed above all above all to public sector enter-
prise (Werenfels 2007, 95–100).\footnote{13}

Ironically, its principal instigator, Belaid Abdesselam, honoured at the 1960

Congress as UGEMA’s ‘father’, was also a principal source of controversy both
then and subsequently. After the student strike of 1956, Abdelhamid Mehri, a
former fellow member of the MTLD’s Central Committee, recruited him to
administer the FLN’s student services. He worked closely with UGEMA’s execu-
tive committee in exile, first in Lausanne and then in Tunis. Despite appear-
ances that apparently even deceived careful French scholars, however, he
did not exert effective tutelage over the student union (Meynier 2002, 512–
513). When UGEMA’s leaders insisted on holding the congress in 1960, Abd-
esselam objected but was overruled, evidently with the support of Mehri.
Abdesselam then refused to attend the congress and left his job, to be
replaced by a long-serving UGEMA officer. With the change of leadership in
Provisional Government of the Algerian Revolution in the summer of 1961,
and Benyoucef Benkhedda, another of Abdesselam’s old MTLD friends, replac-
ing Ferhat Abbas, Abdesselam returned at the request of the GPRA’s new
minister of education, Belkacem Krim, to re-engage with the student union.
he had originally done so much to create. He attended stormy meetings of UGEMA’s Directorate 24–29 August 1961 that resulted in a resolution abdicating and delegating its authority to the FLN. As one of their former leaders told me, they in effect ‘committed suicide’ (Henry 2012, 483).

While this FLN crackdown marked the end of any recognisable UGEMA from the inside, it outwardly continued to represent Algerian students in international gatherings. This was not the first time the FLN had meddled with student affairs. While American and other international student supporters were organising conferences of solidarity on behalf of UGEMA in the spring and summer of 1958, we were oblivious of any internal problem. FLN interference had then paralysed its internal workings shortly after its formal dissolution by French authorities earlier in the year. When FLN officials tried to divide the leadership, however, its five-man Executive held firm and eventually convinced the leadership of the FLN Federation of France that none of their members had actually deserted the FLN when they went to Switzerland. One of the FLN officials, Mohammed Harbi, who had earlier opposed them in the battle over the ‘M’, was understood to have misguided them, but another party official, the late Hafidh Keramane, who had headed the Paris section of UGEMA until 1957, supported the autonomous leadership.

By 1961, the solidarity of these student leaders could no longer prevail. The organisation representing the future Algerian elite was too valuable a prize for the power centres of the Algerian revolution to ignore. Against the GPRA was pitted Boumediene’s General Staff of the external Army of National Liberation. Within the GPRA, various factions jostled for power. In addition to the six wilayas (territorial guerrilla commands) was a seventh, the FLN Federation of France, although its surviving members claim not to have had any interest in UGEMA in 1961. Nevertheless, burgeoning numbers of students were either under the command of wilayas in Algeria or the Federation of France’s University Section (SU) in France. There was ambiguity also in the agreement originally reached between UGEMA and the FLN in the summer of 1958 concerning the division of labour between the SU and UGEMA. The SU considered that it was in charge of the revolutionary indoctrination of all students, whether in France or abroad, whereas UGEMA was to be the Revolution’s international diplomatic arm. UGEMA considered that it represented all Algerian students, including delegates from the SU in France.

The final FLN crackdown in 1961 marked the end of Revolutionary Algeria’s sole experience of an autonomous association. The students would still be broadly representative of Algeria’s civilian political elite, and, had UGEMA endured, it could have articulated the major policy alternatives; instead, Algeria’s commanders summoned the leaders as individuals to execute policies at cross-purposes. Our sample included key figures responsible for Arabisation, the czar of Algerian heavy industry, three additional founders of Sonatrach, important landowning families, and advocates of deregulation and private
enterprise. Given the opportunity, they might have been able to rectify Algeria’s ‘original sin’ of ideological vacuity by holding discussions and debates in independent Algeria. UGEMA represents the lost embryo of Algerian civil society. Might better articulation of policy alternatives have avoided the extremes and excesses of those industrial, cultural, and agrarian revolutions Boumedienne launched in 1971?

Notes

1. The writer wishes to acknowledge the assistance of the University of Texas at Austin and the United States Institute of Peace [grant number 029-07F] for support of the project.
2. Khemisti was assassinated in April 1963 ostensibly for personal rather than political reasons, under circumstances that remain unclear (“Algérie” 2013). As for Benyahia, an Iraqi anti-aircraft missile destroyed his airplane and all aboard in 1982 during his efforts to mediate between Baghdad and Tehran (Cheurfi 2006, 110). Notables appearing in Cheurfi’s invaluable reference book who were also known to have been active UGEMA members were included in my analysis of career trajectories.
3. Also see below, concerning Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi. Ben Bella offered him the ambassadorship to Brazil, but he preferred to practise medicine and was arrested instead.
4. Pervillé notes that the student strike of 1956 reduced the number of ‘Algerians’, the large majority being non-Muslim, from 2080 to 1811. A few Algerian Muslims, notably the late Mohammed Arkoun, did not join the strike. Pervillé cites an estimate of 600 Algerian Muslims studying in France from a suspect official French source, Malan (1957).
5. Zahir Ihaddaden recalls that Benyahia had invited him to accompany him to Moscow as embassy counsellor, but that he preferred to remain a high school teacher, because he was worried about the political developments at that time, early 1963. He subsequently joined him at the Ministry of Information in 1977. See his chapter in Henry (2012, 365).
6. Abdellasif Bouteflika comes from a Nedroma, Tlemcen family that had migrated to Oujda, Morocco, where he completed high school.
7. Dr Ould-Abbes came from Tlemcen and did his medical studies in East Germany. Other UGEMA colleagues recall his strong Marxist orientation, subsequently toned down. The ministry’s official website, more feminised than in Dr Ould-Abbes’ time, is http://www.msnfcf.gov.dz/fr/
8. In his written testimony, Aït Chaalal explains in Henry, Union Générale, 405: ‘UGEMA was the only organization to have been created by a congress, to have functioned on democratic bases, the congresses of which represented the entire body of Algerian students in the world, which elected its respective executives’.
11. Benkobi argues that the FLN leadership had planned the strike, just deciding to let the students decide on the timing as long as it happened before final exams
in late May. His account of the two meetings of the students deliberating about the strike differs, however, from those of other participants.

12. Interview November 23, 2007. Taleb-Ibrahimi (2008, 43), recollects that in his years as minister, he only Arabised the second year of primary education and insisted that the teachers be properly prepared.

13. Werenfels discusses a somewhat younger generation of ‘neo-dinosaurs’.

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IV ème congrès national de l’Union générale des étudiants musulmans algériens (UGEMA) Bir el Bey, Tunisie, 26 juillet – 1er août 1960. Bir el Bey: UGEMA and Secrétariat de Coordination des Unions nationales d’étudiants (COSEC).


