

# First names in Europe and in the Maghreb: A historical overview

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## First names in Europe and in the Maghreb: A historical overview

**Abstract:** Over the past five decades, Maghrebi first names have been increasingly given in Europe. What are the differences between personal names commonly given in Europe and in the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia)? In Europe since the late Middle Ages, anthroponyms include a given name and a hereditary surname. In the Maghreb, this naming system replaced the more complex Berber and Arab tribal names during French colonization (1830–1962). While most Maghrebi first names are of Arabic origin and semantically transparent, in Europe most first names derive from Hebrew, Greek or Latin and thus are semantically opaque. Both regions have names from a sacred text (the New Testament and the Quran) and from religious history (Christian saints and martyrs and relatives and successors of Mohamed), but there are many more secular names in the Maghreb than in Europe. The stocks of personal names of people from Europe and the Maghreb

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remained distinct during the French colonization in the area, and they are still largely unintegrated in present-day France, even among the descendants of Maghrebi immigrants. Among people from the Maghreb, only Jews have been giving Christian first names since the late 19th century.

**Keywords:** Anthroponymy, first name, France, North Africa, integration.

### **Les prénoms en Europe et au Maghreb : Un aperçu historique**

**Résumé :** Lors des cinq dernières décennies, les prénoms maghrébins ont été de plus en plus donnés en Europe. Quelles sont les différences entre les prénoms couramment donnés en Europe et au Maghreb (Maroc, Algérie et Tunisie) ? En Europe, depuis la fin du Moyen Âge, l'anthroponyme comprend un prénom et un nom de famille héréditaire. Au Maghreb, ce système de dénomination a remplacé les noms tribaux berbères et arabes, plus complexes, pendant la colonisation française (1830–1962). Alors que la plupart des prénoms maghrébins sont d'origine arabe et sémantiquement transparents, en Europe la plupart des prénoms sont d'origine hébraïque, grecque ou latine et sont donc sémantiquement opaques. Les deux régions possèdent des noms issus d'un texte sacré (le Nouveau Testament et le Coran) et de l'histoire religieuse (saints et martyrs chrétiens, proches et successeurs de Mohamed), mais les noms profanes sont beaucoup plus nombreux au Maghreb qu'en Europe. Les stocks de noms de personnes originaires d'Europe et du Maghreb sont restés distincts pendant la colonisation française dans la région, et ils sont encore largement non intégrés dans la France actuelle, même chez les descendants d'immigrés maghrébins. Parmi les personnes originaires du Maghreb, seuls les juifs donnent des prénoms chrétiens depuis la fin du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle.

**Mots-clés :** Anthroponymie, prénom, France, Afrique du Nord, intégration.

### **Vornamen in Europa und im Maghreb: Ein historischer Überblick**

**Zusammenfassung:** In den letzten fünf Jahrzehnten wurden in Europa immer mehr maghrebinische Vornamen gegeben. Welche Unterschiede gibt es zwischen Vornamen, die in Europa und im Maghreb (Marokko, Algerien und Tunesien) üblich vergeben werden? In Europa besteht das Anthroponym seit dem späten Mittelalter aus einem Vornamen und einem erblichen Familiennamen. Im Maghreb ersetzte dieses Namenssystem während der französischen Kolonialisierung (1830–1962) die komplexeren berberischen und arabischen Stammesnamen. Während die meisten maghrebinischen Vornamen arabischen Ursprungs und semantisch transparent sind, stammen die meisten Vornamen in Europa aus dem Hebräischen, Griechischen oder Lateinischen und sind daher semantisch undurchsichtig. In beiden Regionen gibt es Namen aus heiligen Texten (Neues Testament und Koran) und aus der Religionsgeschichte (christliche Heilige und Märtyrer sowie Angehörigen und Nachfolger Mohammeds), doch sind weltliche Namen im Maghreb weitaus häufiger als in Europa. Die Namensbestände von Personen aus Europa und dem Maghreb blieben während der französischen Kolonialisierung in der Region separat und sind im heutigen Frankreich noch weitgehend nicht integriert, selbst bei den Nachkommen von Einwanderern aus dem Maghreb. Unter den Menschen aus dem Maghreb geben nur die Juden seit dem Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts christliche Vornamen.

**Schlüsselbegriffe:** Anthroponymik, Vorname, Frankreich, Nordafrika, Integration.

## **First names in Europe and in the Maghreb: A historical overview**

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### **1. Introduction**

“Is *Muhammad*, or *Mohamed* as transliterated in France, a French first name?” This question sums up a political debate on the assimilation of the descendants of French immigrants from the Maghreb (i.e. Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia) that has been raging among French political commentators since 2018 (Landolsi 2021, 2022). As a matter of fact, *Mohamed* has been among the twenty most given names to boys born in France precisely since that same year. Some observers consider this a sign of poor cultural integration of immigrants and their descendants from the Maghreb. By 2020, *Mohamed* had moved up the rankings to eighteenth most common name given to boys born in France (Insee 2022), while that same year it came tenth in Belgium (Statbel 2022). In both countries, *Mohamed* first appeared in the lexicon of names in the second half of the 20th century, mainly among French and Belgian immigrants from the Maghreb and their descendants. Even though it has become a common personal name in both countries, pundits participating in the above-mentioned political debates agree that *Mohamed* is neither a French nor Belgian name.

In this article I attempt to address the following question: what are the differences and similarities between European and Maghrebi first names, and what do they reveal about these two areas? More specifically, I consider the differences in the structure of anthroponyms, the lexicon and the types of first names, but also the history of names and present-day name-giving practices in Europe and in the Maghreb. Precisely, when referring to Maghrebi first names, I refer to the form(s) adopted in European countries, allowing me to study the first names of Maghrebi immigrants and their descendants in Europe, especially in France. First names are not only a primary source of information about languages, religions, social organization and many other aspects of past human populations, but they may also help contextualize contemporary debates regarding the assimilation of immigrants from the Maghreb in Europe (Landolsi 2021).

In European countries other than France and Belgium, the first name of the prophet of Islam is mainly given by immigrants from Arab countries

outside the Maghreb, or from other countries with Muslim majority populations such as Turkey and Pakistan. Thus, *Muhammad* was the fifth most common first name given to boys born in England and Wales in 2020 ([Office for national statistics 2021](#)). *Mohammed*, the German transliteration of the name, is the thirty-fifth most commonly given name to boys in Germany ([Beliebte-Vornamen 2021](#)), and *Mohamed*, the Swedish transliteration of the name, ranks thirty-seventh among names given to boys born in Sweden ([Statistics Sweden 2021](#)). To maintain a scope of analysis relevant to the focus of this article, the ensuing literature review will draw comparisons between first names in Europe and those in use in the Maghreb. The present essay, therefore, does not claim to present arguments valid for the entire Muslim, or even Arab, world. This essay also does not consider the variations of forms of Maghrebi first names in present-day Europe.

## 2. The structure of anthroponyms in Europe and in the Maghreb

In Europe, between the 11th and the 15th centuries and with substantial regional variations, the personal naming system shifted from a one to a two-element system, comprising a given name assigned at birth (*nomen proprium*), and a surname (*cognomen*) which progressively became hereditary. In France, this two-element system first made its appearance in the 10th century, eventually supplanting other existing systems (including the early medieval single-element one) between the 11th and 13th centuries ([Bourin 1990](#); [Bourin & Chareille 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 2002a, 2002b](#); [Beck 1997](#); [Chareille 2008](#)). In France the “genesis of modern anthroponymy” is first noticeable among the male laity in the South and later spread to the North, clerics and women during the central Middle Ages. Similarly, in Italy and Portugal, the two-element system became prevalent roughly in the same period ([Menant & Martin 1994](#); [Bourin 1990](#)). In some European regions, personal naming systems could temporarily be more complex, comprising multiple elements, e.g. a given name and a surname which could include the father’s name (*nomen paternum*) as well as a place of origin or residence or a professional activity, but such systems were quickly replaced by the two-element system.

By contrast, in the Maghreb, the personal names of the Berbers, the population that lived in the area prior to the Arab conquest of the region in the 7th century, included three elements: a first name assigned at birth; a patronymic composed of *Ou* (“son of”) and the father’s first name, or even the first name of the paternal grandfather; and an ethnic designation often preceded by *Aït* (“those of”) ([Yermèche 2013: 48–50](#)). One of the outcomes of the conquest of the Maghreb was the Arabization of the structure of most of its inhabitants’ personal names ([Yermèche 2013: 54–55](#)). Non-Arabized Berbers retained their three-element system. Arabized Berbers, instead, kept their

tripartite naming system but replaced the Berber particles *Ou* ('son of') and *Aït* ('descendants of') with the Arabic descent particles *Ben* and *Ould* ('son of') and the ethnic particles *Beni* and *Ouled* ('children of'). Additionally, between the 7th and 19th centuries, some Maghrebi scholars adopted an Arabic personal name system that comprised five elements (Larcher 2013; Grangaud & Michel 2010; Beeston 1971).

It was only with the colonization of the Maghreb by France, and specifically with the establishment of the *État civil des indigènes d'Algérie* (the civil registers of the natives of Algeria) in 1882, that the inhabitants formally abandoned the lineage-based Arab-Berber naming system (consisting of up to five elements) in favor of an individual European model (consisting of a first name and a surname), with tribal names disappearing from the new naming system (Yermèche 2013: 59). The Europeanized form of naming was adopted in relations with the French administration but in practice, at a local level, the traditional naming system somehow continued to be used. After independence (in Morocco and Tunisia in 1956, and in Algeria in 1962), all three Maghrebi countries have kept the civil registration system that was established by the French, including the personal name structure used in France and in the West. However, since this practice did not correspond to local usage, until recently a small number of inhabitants did not know what their "family name" might be.

### 3. The lexicon of first names in Europe and in the Maghreb

In Europe, by the late Middle Ages, most Old Testament names fell into disuse (Leibring 2016: 206); most people were given Christian names from the New Testament or the names of saints or martyrs (Lawson 2016: 176). This shift accounts, for example, for the growth in popularity of the male first names *John* and *Peter* in Europe. It is around this time, as well, that the Latin given name *Iohannes* transformed into the various cognates *Jean* in French, *Giovanni* in Italian, *Juan* in Spanish, *João* in Portuguese, *John* in English, and *Hans* in German, etc. France as well followed this general pattern: by the late Middle Ages, the stock of predominantly Germanic first names was replaced with one of Hebrew, Greek or Latin origin, taken from the New Testament and from the pantheon of Christian saints and martyrs (Bozon 1987: 84–85). For example, the French first name *Jean* is derived from the Old French *Jehan*, which comes from the Latin *Iohannes* or *Ioannes*. This Latin first name is itself derived from the Greek *Ioannis* (*Ἰωάννης*) which in turn comes from the Hebrew *Yohanan* (יְהוֹנָן) or *Yehohanan* (יְהוֹהָנָן), which in classical Hebrew means 'God is good'. Sometimes, the newborn was named after the saint honored on the day of his/her birth, according to the local Christian calendar, or after the patron saint of his/her birthplace (Saarelma 2009: 201).

In the Maghreb from the 7th century onwards, Berber first names were

replaced by Arabic ones (Yermèche 2013: 54–55). So much so, that even the members of the Berber dynasties that ruled North Africa – the Almoravids (1055–1147) and Almohads (1147–1269) – bore Arabic first names. Consequently, for several centuries the stock of first names common among the Berbers in the Maghreb has been almost indistinguishable from the one in use among Arabs. More specifically, the Berber populations adopted Arabic first names either in their original Arabic, or in a Berberized form, i.e. a variant adapted to the linguistic and phonetic constraints of Berber languages through linguistic erosion. For example, in its Berberized form, the Arabic first name *Mohamed* became *Mohand*, *Abou* was rendered as *Abbou*, *Amina* as *Mina*, *Ismail* as *Smaïn*, *Issa* as *Issou*, *Hassan* as *Lahcen*, and so on.

The process of onomastic Arabization that took place in the Maghreb between the 7th and 19th centuries was accompanied by a process of onomastic Islamization: not only did the Arabic names of characters mentioned in the Quran and relatives of the prophet Mohamed become widespread, but religious and theophoric first names (i.e. personal names embedding the name of their god) multiplied (Yermèche 2013: 55). Yermèche (2013: 56) goes on to say that Berber personal names were also replaced by secular Arabic names, such as *Dehbia*, *Djouhra*, *Fatma*, *Lyes*, *Nedjma*, *Seghir* or *Sofiane*. Today, as a result, only a rather small percentage of Berbers have Berber first names. Among this minority, most have first names derived from Arabic that have been Berberized, while others carry Berber personal names (Yermèche 2013: 48–50). In these few cases, the choice of Berber first names is related to the political climate and they were mainly given either before independence – such as *Ijja* (‘the one with a sweet smell’), *Idir* and *Iddr* (‘the living one’, respectively in Kabyle and in Tachelhit) – or more recently, in the wake of the Berber Spring of 1980. These include names such as *Massinissa* (a Berber leader of the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, first king of Numidia), *Yugurtha* (a king of Numidia of the 2nd century BC who resisted Roman expansion) and *Kahina* (a Berber queen of the 7th century who resisted Arab expansion).

Following the establishment of the *État civil des indigènes d’Algérie* by the French (1882), Arab and Berber personal names were transliterated from Arabic to Latin script, only to be transliterated back to Arabic after Algerian independence (1962). However, during the colonial rule in the Maghreb – which lasted longest in Algeria (1830–1962) – the onomastic stock proper to Arabs and Berbers on the one hand, and the one in use by French and Europeans on the other, remained separate: nearly no French or European settler chose Arabic personal names for their children (see e.g. Gomez-Le Chevanton 2021: 399–412), and almost no Arab or Berber native was given a French or European first name (Varro & Lesbet 1986: 144).

Thus, in the late colonial period, during the censuses of 1954, 1962 and 1968, the French statistical apparatus could use the first name and surname of Algerian residents to distinguish indigenous Muslims, who had Arabic or

Berber first names, from French and European settlers, who had Christian or Hebrew first names (Escafré-Dublet et al. 2018: 50). For example, when singer Josephine Baker took in two foundlings from war-torn Algeria in 1956, her adopted son of Berber origins was named *Brahim* and she later Westernized his name to *Brian*. The other child was the daughter of French settlers, named *Marianne*, and whose name Baker chose to keep (Denéchère 2011).

In the Maghreb, since independence and the Arabization policies carried out during the period of pan-Arab nationalism, French and Berber have been replaced by Arabic as the language in which teaching is carried out. Additionally, roughly until the 2000s in Morocco, and until today in Algeria, laws and informal lists of authorized first names sought to prevent or even prohibit the attribution of non-Arabic, and especially Berber, first names (Tilmatine 2015: 13).

The evolution of the stock of personal names commonly used in the Maghreb since independence has been little studied so far. However, we can say that it is still customary in some families to name their first son *Mohamed*, after the prophet of Islam, and their first daughter *Fatima*, after his favorite daughter. More generally, there is a proclivity for naming children after an ancestor. According to a study carried out in the 1980s:

Paradoxically, the French language [in Algeria] has never been as widespread as it has been since independence: this is evident in the introduction, by a few French-speaking Algerian families, of “non-Islamic” sounding names that are devoid of religious undertones without being “too French”. It is the era of the *Ludmillas*, *Morgans*, *Salys*, *Médys*, *Fériels*, etc. (Varro & Lesbet 1986: 144, my translation)

In Algeria in the 1970s and 1980s, Slavic names such as *Sonia*, *Ludmilla* and *Katia* were quite popular, as Algeria’s relations with the USSR and communist Europe led to mixed marriages between Algerian men and Slavic women. However,

If the Algerian father announces to his people that his son’s name is *Jean-Pierre*, he will be rejected irrespective of whether he speaks Arabic or turns out to be a fervent believer in Islam, whereas if he says his name is *Mohamed*, *Réda*, or *Khallil*, he will be accepted with no one caring to investigate whether the child eats pork, speaks only French, or even if he acknowledges or not the existence of God. (Varro & Lesbet 1986: 147, my translation)

I will conclude this section on the lexicon of first names with a note on their semantic content. As we saw, since the late Medieval and Early Modern times, in France and more generally in Europe, most first names are drawn from the New Testament. Since these are of Hebrew, Greek, or Latin origin, their meaning is not immediately intelligible to the standard speaker of modern



languages. Thus, they are semantically opaque (Saarelma 2009: 201), which may explain, at least in part, why personal names are so difficult to remember (MacKenzie 2018: 303). Conversely, in the Arab world, most personal names are common nouns, adjectives or verbs from everyday vocabulary which are therefore semantically transparent (Landman 2016: 131). Such names include those of Quranic figures like *Mohamed* ('the highly praised'), also rendered as *Ahmed* ('especially praiseworthy') and *Mustafa* ('the chosen one'), as well as theophoric names such as *Abdallah* ('servant of Allah'). Semantically transparent names also comprise certain secular names which describe charming qualities or aesthetically pleasing things, such as *Bashir* ('harbinger of good news'), *Samir/Samira* ('evening discussion companion') or *Yasmine* ('jasmine') (Bramwell 2011: 38–40).

#### 4. Typologies of first names in Europe and in the Maghreb

In order to find one's way through the multifarious onomastic landscapes in Europe and in the Maghreb, it is useful to distinguish between: (i) religious names taken from sacred texts; (ii) religious names drawn from history; and (iii) secular names (Table 1). Such a classification enables us to compare the cultural references contained in personal names proper to these two areas. For the etymology of these names, when available, I have referred to the website *Behind the Name* as well as the French and American *Wikipedia* anthroponymy portals. In order to probe the reliability and accuracy of these sites I asked specialists of European, Arabic and Berber languages to verify these etymologies.

Table 1: Typologies of first names given in Europe and in the Maghreb

		Europe	Maghreb
Religious first names	From the sacred text	Names of figures from the New Testament	Names of figures from the Quran
	From history	Names of Christian saints and martyrs	Names of relatives and successors of Mohamed
Secular first names		Of Greek, Latin, Germanic, Slavic, Celtic, etc. origin.	Of mainly Arabic, but also Berber, Persian, etc. origin.

##### 4.1. Religious first names from sacred texts

In Europe, most of the first names attributed since the late Medieval and Early Modern period are those of figures from the New Testament. Written in Greek, the New Testament contains various names of Greek origin such as *Andrew* ('male'), *Luke* ('from Lucania'), *Philip* ('friend of horses'), *Peter* ('stone'), *Stephen* ('crown') and *Timothy* ('honoring God'). The text also contains names of Latin origin, such as *Mark* (Roman god 'Mars') or *Paul*



(‘small’). Others derive from Hebrew – such as *Elizabeth* (‘God is an oath’), *Gabriel* (‘God is my strength’), *John* (‘God is good’), *Joseph* (‘he will add’), *Matthew* (‘God’s gift’) or *Simon* (‘he has heard’) – or Aramaic, such as *Bartholomew* (‘son of Talmi’) and *Thomas* (‘twin’), for example. These names have been among the most popular in 20th-century France (Insee 2022) and Italy (Rossebastiano & Papa 2008).

In the Maghreb, starting from the 7th century individuals were named after characters mentioned in the Quran. Written in Arabic, the Quran contains names of mainly Arabic origin. Like the New Testament, the Quran also contains names derived from Hebrew and Aramaic, including the Arabic versions of first names from the Hebrew Bible such as *Adam*, *Ayoub* (Job), *Daoud* (David), *Haroun* (Aaron), *Ibrahim* (Abraham), *Ismail* (Ismael), *Moussa* (Moses), *Sulayman* (Solomon), *Youssef* or *Youssef* (Joseph), *Yunus* (Jonah), *Zakaria* (Zachariah), etc. Some of these names, such as *Ibrahim*, *Moussa*, *Youssef* and *Zakaria*, are common in contemporary Maghreb. The text also contains Arabic forms of New Testament names of Hebrew origin, such as *Aïssa* (Jesus) or *Yahya* (John), and Arabic forms of Hebrew names from both the Old and New Testaments, such as *Djibril* (Gabriel, the Angel of Revelation in Islam) and *Maryam* (Mary). Some of these Quranic names of Hebrew origin, which are commonly given names, are associated with pre-Islamic Jewish or Christian characters, such as *Ibrahim*, *Moussa* and *Maryam*, mentioned in Sura Maryam. Other, less frequent personal names, are associated with great figures of Islam, be they central characters of the sacred text such as *Djibril*, or historical ones such as *Haroun* (Haroun Al-Rachid, an Abbasid caliph of the 8th–9th centuries, portrayed in *The Thousand and One Nights*) and *Suleyman* (Suleyman the Magnificent, an Ottoman sultan of the 16th century).

Theophoric names common in the Maghreb are constructed around the attributes that the Islamic tradition recognizes to God according to the following structure: ‘Abd al-*X*’, where Abd means ‘servant’ (or slave), and *X* is one of the 99 attributes of Allah mentioned in the Quran. Some of the most common ones are *Abdallah* (‘servant of God’), *Abdelali* (‘servant of the sublime’), *Abdelaziz* (‘servant of the mighty’), *Abdelhakim* (‘servant of the wise’), *Abdelhamid* (‘servant of the praised’), *Abdelkarim* (‘servant of the generous’), *Abdellatif* (‘servant of the gentle’), *Abdelmajid* (‘servant of the glorious’), *Abdelmalik* (‘servant of the king’), *Abdennour* (‘servant of the light’), *Abdelwahid* (‘servant of the unique’) and *Abdul Rahman* (‘servant of the merciful’), sometimes abbreviated to *Abdel*. In contemporary Maghreb, these theophoric names and others like *Bouabdallah* (‘father of the servant of God’) have a strong religious connotation. This is not the case, however, of personal names that include only one of the attributes of God (*Aziz*, *Karim*, etc.), since these are also adjectives used in everyday language. These may also be associated with names ending in *-eddine*, such as *Nasreddine* (‘support of faith’) and *Nouredine* (‘light of religion’), as well as other names like *Iman* (‘faith’).

## 4.2. Religious first names from history

Since the late Middle Ages, in Europe, most individuals were named after saints following country- or region-specific Christian calendars according to which each day of the year is dedicated to a different saint. In the Maghreb as well, among the most frequently given names are those of the prophet Mohamed's relatives, such as *Aisha* ('lively', after the prophet's third wife), *Ali* ('sublime', after a cousin and son-in-law of the prophet and fourth Caliph), *Amine* ('truthful', after the sixth Abbasid caliph), *Amir* ('prince', after the commander [of the believers]), *Abu Bakr* ('camel', after a companion of the prophet and first caliph), *Fatima* ('weaning a little one', after a daughter of the prophet and wife of the fourth caliph), *Hamza* (uncertain meaning, after the founder of Druzism), *Khadija* ('premature', after the first wife of the prophet and first convert to Islam), *Omar* ('flourishing', after the second caliph), *Rachid / Rachida* ('well guided', after the first four caliphs), *Said / Saida* ('happy', after the title of the descendants of Mohamed), *Uthman* ('bird', after the third caliph), *Zaynab* pronounced in the Maghreb *Zineb* (uncertain meaning, after a daughter and two of the prophet's wives), etc. In contemporary Maghreb, these traditional first names often seem to be transmitted not only for their religious connotation, but also as a tribute to an ancestor, often a grandfather or grandmother, who bore them. Similarly, among French people of Maghrebi origin, these names are often attributed in homage to a parent or grandparent, if not as the first, at least as a middle name.

## 4.3. Secular first names

In Europe, secular names can be of Greek – such as *Alexander* ('to defend a man') – but also of Latin, Slavic, Celtic, and often Germanic origin. Examples of the latter include *Albert* ('noble and brilliant'), *Alfred* ('council of elves'), *Edward* ('rich guard'), *Edgar* ('rich spear'), *Eric* ('always a leader'), *Frederick* ('peaceful leader'), *Gerard* ('brave spear'), *Henry* ('head of the house'), *Hugh* ('spirit'), *Matilda* ('strength in battle'), *Raymond* ('protective council'), *Richard* ('brave leader') and *Robert* ('brilliant fame').

In the Maghreb, where most nouns, adjectives and verbs may become a personal name, secular names abound. Although some of these Arabic names are of Persian origin, such as *Chakib* ('patience'), *Yara* ('friend') and *Yasmine* ('jasmine'), the vast majority derive from Arabic and are semantically transparent in this language. This is the case of *Adel* ('just'), *Alyâ* ('sky'), *Amir* ('prince') / *Amira* ('princess'), *Anis / Anissa* ('friend'), *Assia* ('comforting'), *Bachir* ('bringer of good news'), *Fadila* ('virtuous'), *Jamel / Jamila* ('beautiful'), *Dunya* ('world'), *Farès* ('knight'), *Farhat* ('happy'), *Farid / Farida* ('unique'), *Haifa* ('slender'), *Haitham* ('eagle'), *Hamza* ('strong'), *Hania* ('joking'), *Hisham* ('generous'), *Jalil* ('sublime'), *Kamel / Kamila*

(‘perfect’), *Kenza* (‘treasure’), *Khaled* (‘eternal’), *Khalil* (‘friend’), *Lamia* (‘brilliant’), *Leila* (‘night’), *Malika* (‘queen’), *Mona* (‘wishes’), *Messahoud* (‘happy’), *Mouloud* (‘newborn’), *Najwa* (‘secret’), *Nijma* (‘star’), *Nour* (‘light’), *Rim* (‘antelope’), *Sadek* (‘loyal’), *Sahar* (‘dawn’), *Sami / Samia* (‘sublime’), *Samir / Samira* (‘evening discussion companion’), *Sana* (‘splendor’), *Sayf* (‘sword’), *Selma* (‘safe’), *Souad* (‘happy’), *Sumaya* (‘up there’), *Tahir / Tahirah* (‘purity’), *Tayeb* (‘pleasant’), *Walid* (‘born’), *Wissam* (‘beautiful face’) or *Zahra* (‘rose’). In the Maghreb since the 1980s, these secular names seem to be chosen independent of the degree of religious devotion. Along with these secular Arabic names, other non-Arabic names of Hebrew (*Samy*) or Greek (*Lydia*), Celtic and Latin (*Sabrina*) or Slavic origin (*Katia* and *Sonia*) are nonetheless given in the Maghreb because their final in *-i* or *-(i)a* sounds Arabic.

## 5. Jewish first names in Europe and in the Maghreb

From the early Middle Ages until around the 19th century, in Europe and in the Maghreb as well as in the Near East, most Jewish men had two names. One was a religious first name (*shem ha-qodesh*) of Hebrew or Aramaic origin, which was given on the day of circumcision and used when men were called to read the Torah in the synagogue and during rites of passage (*bar mitzvah*, marriage, and death). The second one was a secular personal name (*kinnui*) derived from the vernacular (be it Arabic, Berber, Greek, Romance, Germanic, Slavonic, etc.) or a foreign language, and was used in daily interactions among Jews, non-Jews and with the administration (Beider 2012: 44, 51). Since Jewish women were not called to read the Torah, they were given only one secular name (Beider 2012: 44). Until around the 19th century, even these secular first names – be they male or female – were mostly specific to Jews.

In Western Europe between the end of the 18th and the 19th century, the emancipation of Jews – that is, the achievement of equal rights to those of non-Jewish citizens – led them, for the first time, to assign Christian, that is, New Testament, personal names to their children (Landman 2016: 137–138). For example, during the 19th century among the Parisian Jewish bourgeoisie, the percentage of Jewish given names steadily declined from nearly 40% for men in the 1810s to less than 5% in the 1890s (Grange 2016: 78–79). Similar observations were made regarding the Jewish population of Turin, in northern Italy, from the 1870s onward (Allegra 1997: 80–86), and in the Marche region of central Italy in the 19th century (Gasperoni 2018: 148). Even before emancipation, the Jewish bourgeoisie in central and eastern Europe had begun to choose increasingly Christian names. Such was the case, for example, of the Jews in the German states in the second half of the 18th century, who abandoned Yiddish in favor of German (Beider 2012: 45–50).

In colonial Algeria, towards the end of the 19th century,

The study of first names also shows an influence of European culture, with the adoption by a lesser, though still significant, portion of the Jewish population, of first names previously unknown among Jews. The practice of double first names, both Jewish and European, attests to a desire to belong to both. At the end of the 19th century, for some of these families – those most in contact with the Europeans or most open to their culture – the transitional process was undeniably underway. (Kateb & Brunet 2018: 20, my translation)

The onomastic assimilation of Maghrebi Jews in Europe continued in the 20th century, particularly after their arrival in metropolitan France and their enrollment in the French education system (Bahloul 1985). As a result, in metropolitan France in 2008, only 6% of inhabitants of Jewish origin had a Jewish first name (Mignot 2021: 281–282). Furthermore, most inhabitants of Jewish origin (59%) or Christian origin (82%) or whose parents had no religion (75%) carried a French first name, while most inhabitants of Muslim origin had an Arab-Muslim first name (73%) rather than a French one (4%) (Mignot 2021: 281–282, 306–307).

## 6. First names of Maghrebi immigrants and their descendants in France

In France in 1992, more children and grandchildren of immigrants from Algeria had a first name specific to their country of origin (84% and 35%) than children and grandchildren of immigrants from Spain (25% and 7%) (Valetas & Bringé 2009). Similarly, in France in the 2000s, more descendants of Maghrebi immigrants had a first name specific to their region of provenance than descendants of immigrants from Europe, Africa and Asia (Araï et al. 2015: 145–146; Fourquet & Manternach 2019: 175; Mignot 2021: 48).

Mignot (2021) analyzes in detail the top 20 first names of Maghrebi immigrants and their children and grandchildren in France in 2008 (39–43). Among immigrants from the Maghreb with an Arab, Berber or Muslim background, the largest share of the most popular male names are religious ones from the Quran, such as *Mohamed* (also spelled *Mohammed*), *Ahmed*, *Brahim*, *Abdelkader*, *Abdellah*, *Mustapha* and *Driss*, or names of the relatives and successors of the prophet Mohamed, such as *Rachid* (the first of the four ‘rightly-guided’ caliphs), *Ali* (the fourth caliph), *Said* (the prophet’s companion), *Omar* (the second caliph) and *Hassan* (the prophet’s grandson). By contrast, the majority of the most popular female names are secular ones, such as *Samira* (‘evening discussion companion’), *Malika* (‘queen’), *Nadia* (‘who calls’), *Zohra* (‘flower in bloom’), *Naima* (‘quiet’), *Karima* (‘generous’), *Samia* (‘sublime’), *Rachida* (‘rightly guided’), *Saïda* (‘happy’), *Bouchra* (‘joy at the announcement of good news’), *Yamina* (‘fortunate’),

*Jamila* ('beautiful') and *Najat* ('greeting'). As a matter of fact, few Maghrebi immigrants, whether Arab or Berber, Francized their first name when they acquired French nationality (Tribalat et al. 1996: 162).

Among the children of Maghrebi immigrants, the majority of the most popular male names are also religious names, whilst, for females, the most popular names remain secular ones. However, if we compare the names of first generation migrants to their children's, we can observe that some of the latter are mixed or ambiguous. Such names may be homonyms or names that are common in Arabic but also in other cultures, such as *Nadia* ('who calls' in Arabic and 'hope' in Slavic languages), *Sarah* and *Myriam* (first names of Hebrew origin which can be considered as Arabic but also as French), or *Inès* (the dialectal pronunciation of the Arabic first name *Īnās* which means 'friendliness', but also the French form of a Spanish name of Greek origin).

In 2008, among the grandchildren of Maghrebi immigrants in France, the largest share of the most popular male names were still religious ones. Conversely, the most popular female names are generally secular names or ambiguous names with Arabic undertones. Girls, therefore, tend to be given less traditional first names than boys. Moreover, compared to immigrants and their children, some grandchildren of immigrants bear names which are not given in the Maghreb, such as *Kevin*, *Sophia*, *Sofia*, *Anaïs*, *Melissa* and *Maeva*. Most of these are feminine names, further corroborating the fact that the names of granddaughters of Maghrebi immigrants often sound much less Arabo-Muslim than those chosen for grandsons. One has to point out, however, that even among the granddaughters, few of the most popular names are unambiguously French. As an early study on the first name *Mohamed* showed, "The fact that this name is so strongly maintained in France in spite of the risk of ethnic visibility for its bearer testifies to the intensity of the feeling of national, cultural and religious belonging of this group" (Streff-Fénart 1990: 6).

Are these phenomena specific to Maghrebi immigrants and their descendants in France? In Germany from the 1980s to the 2000s, immigrants from Turkey were those who most often gave specific names to their children. More precisely, 90% of immigrants from Turkey chose such names for their children, compared to 43% of immigrants from former Yugoslavia and 35% of immigrants from Southern Europe (Gerhards & Hans 2009: 1116). In addition, immigrants from Turkey were those who less often opted for German names, "all other things being equal" (Gerhards & Hans 2009: 1116–1124; see also Tuppatt & Gerhards 2021). To cite another example: in the 2000s almost all Muslim Pakistani immigrants in Glasgow (Scotland) and their descendants had first names of Arabic origin (Bramwell 2011: 45–46). Thus, what can be observed in France – i.e. a general tendency of Maghrebi immigrants and their descendants to continue, to a greater extent than other settlers, to give first names that are specific to their origins –, fits a more general pattern that is also evident among immigrants of Muslim origin in Germany and in the United Kingdom.

## 7. Conclusion

This literature review has compared first names given in Europe and in the Maghreb. Anthroponyms in Europe since the late Middle Ages usually include two elements, consisting of both a given name and a hereditary surname. In the Maghreb, after the Arab invasion of the 7th century, the tripartite anthroponymic system was replaced by one that comprised up to five elements which was used until the 19th century. As from the 19th century, that is to say since French colonial rule (1830–1962), anthroponyms in the Maghreb have included only a given name and a hereditary surname – a system which was kept even after Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia obtained their independence.

In Europe, since the late Middle Ages, most individuals were named after figures from the New Testament or Christian saints or martyrs. As these Christian names are of Hebrew, Greek or Latin origin, they are semantically opaque. In the Maghreb, on the other hand, most first names are semantically transparent since these are generally nouns, adjectives, or verbs in Arabic, sometimes given in a Berberized form. These two stocks of first names remained separate during French colonial rule in the Maghreb. Since obtaining independence, the Maghrebi states have made it difficult for citizens to give first names that are of Berber, as opposed to Arabic, origin. Both Europe and the Maghreb have religious names taken from a relevant sacred text, i.e. the New Testament and the Quran, as well as religious names taken from history, such as those of Christian saints and martyrs and the relatives and successors of Mohamed. Both regions also have secular names, but there are many more secular names in the Maghreb, and more generally in the Arab world, than in most European countries.

With regard to Jews, they started giving non-Jewish first names, that is to say Christian ones, in the late 18th century in Europe, and in the late 19th century in the colonized Maghreb. Such onomastic assimilation does not seem to be occurring with Muslims in Europe. In France in the early 21st century, compared to descendants of immigrants from other countries, descendants of Maghrebi immigrants with an Arab, Berber or Muslim background have names that are more generally specific to their origins and less often French. In other words, the first names of people from the Maghreb are still largely unintegrated with those of the rest of the population, since giving the name of a Christian saint or martyr may be considered as a form of betrayal towards one's family and the Islamic community in general. If *Mohamed* is rarely considered a French or Belgian name, despite being among the most commonly given names in these countries, it is not only because it is an Arab and a Muslim (Quranic) name, but also because it is associated with a group of immigrants that rarely choose French names for their children.

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