



The Religious Dimension in the French Campaign in Algeria

Houria Baba

houriadz0@gmail.com

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Echahid Hamma Lakhdar El Oued

Hiba Kenioua

Hibaccik@gmail.com

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Echahid Hamma Lakhdar El Oued

Zohra Korichi

chzohra390@gmail.com

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Echahid Hamma Lakhdar El Oued

Abstract:

The religious dimension in the French campaign in Algeria was characterized by a strategy governed by the spirit of Crusade, aimed at eradicating the Islamic religion. This was evident through various statements made by political, military, and religious officials, such as Prime Minister Paulinack, Minister of War Clément Toniz, and Minister of Religious Affairs Bishop Frisnous. They played a prominent role in inciting the king to invade Algeria and expedite the process of occupation. To avoid opposition from major European countries to the invasion of Algeria, the phenomenon of piracy and the issue of liberating European Christian prisoners from the hands of enemies of the Christian faith were exploited. After successfully occupying the territory, the French quickly erased all traces of Islamic religion, such as mosques, zawiya (religious schools), and Quranic schools. Mosques were either converted into churches, demolished, or turned into stables. They seized control of religious endowments, and priests and religious figures openly called for Christianity, as did Father Dubois.

Keywords: Religious dimension, French campaign, Algeria, Islamic religion, religious figures, French policy.

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Introduction:

The political situation in France at the beginning of the 19th century was marked by significant political pressures due to the spread of anti-religious authority ideas as a result of the French Revolution. This was especially prominent after the return of the Bourbon family to power in 1814 and the emergence of the conservative trend

saturated with Christian values, which was able to influence political life. As a result, the latter worked to achieve external victories that could shape French public opinion abroad. Algeria became the field that served their political strategy by exploiting the issue of liberating Christian prisoners, crushing the dens of thieves, and eliminating the phenomenon of piracy.

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Thus, the invasion of Algeria was a political objective with the blessing and encouragement of religious figures.

This research paper aims to shed light on the role of the religious dimension in supporting the French campaign in Algeria.

1. Factors contributing to the emergence of the religious dimension in the French campaign in Algeria

The Crusades formed a chapter in the ongoing conflict between the East and the West during the period from 1095 to 1291 CE (1). While these wars directed towards the East came to a halt, they continued in the lands of the Maghreb. This region witnessed persistent wars with the Western Crusaders. The Almoravid dynasty and later the Almohad dynasty bore the greatest burden in halting the Crusader advance towards Al-Andalus and the Maghreb (2). After the fall of the Almohad dynasty and the division of the Maghreb into small states, the Spanish and Portuguese expansion began along the coasts of the Maghreb. One of the factors that fueled the Crusaders' animosity towards the region was the will of Queen Isabella, which she left before her death in 1504 CE, aimed at eliminating Islam: "I hope that my daughter, the princess, and her husband, the prince, will be obedient to the Church of our Holy Mother. They must protect it and not cease their efforts to conquer Africa and fight against the infidels." (3)

Therefore, the West mobilized to combat Islam, working to uproot it from its land and then pursue it and encircle it in the period spanning from the 16th to the 19th century. This was indicated by "Tunibi" when he stated: "The matter was not limited to isolating the Islamic world, but if it were possible to completely besiege it. In the late 16th and 17th centuries, the noose was tightened around the victim's neck, and this

noose was consolidated during the period between 1800 and 1915 through colonization, in order to later impose its culture and civilization. Western sovereignty over an Arab or Islamic country means facilitating the conversion of Muslims to Christianity, and its loss results in a completely opposite movement (4)." From here, we understand the position of Islam in the conflict between the Christian West and the Arab Maghreb, which is a conflict imbued with religious connotations and among the factors leading to the imposition of control over the region.

The religious situation in France prior to the occupation contributed to the emergence of the religious dimension of the French campaign. The Catholic Church experienced significant crises after the French Revolution to the extent that in the last quarter of the 18th century, a separation between religion and state occurred (5). Secularism embodied one of the characteristics of the French Revolution (6). However, with the beginning of the 20th century and the return of the Bourbon dynasty, two intellectual trends emerged. One was a liberal trend that drew its ideas from the French Revolution and the slogans of the Napoleonic era. The other was a conservative trend associated with Christian values and adherence to the teachings of the Church (7). This trend viewed the Church as a religious institution based on traditions and a reference point for solidifying the social system (8). This conservative movement was able to influence political, social, and economic life (9). During the reign of Louis XVIII, the Clergy Party was established, and they made great efforts to serve the church. Their efforts began to bear fruit during the reign of Charles X because he had a strong inclination towards ecclesiasticism (i.e.,



supporting the church). Due to his advanced age, reaching seventy-seven, this king was unlikely to change his ideas. He implemented the program of the Clergy Party in full, and even adopted an external religious policy that contributed to the activity of religious missions, the most important of which was the Jesuit order (10). This reactionary policy was further solidified by the appointment of Polignac as the head of the ministry. He adopted a policy that focused on restructuring society and granting political positions to men of the clergy (11), thus restoring their influence in state affairs, especially in education. He also attempted to establish a strong aristocracy surrounded by privileges. However, due to his weakness, indecisiveness, and fear of implementing this extremist reactionary program, he relied on foreign victories to win over the French people and be able to execute his policy (12).

The province of Algeria, which was associated with piracy and the hub of Christian prisoners by Europeans (13), fueled Christian animosity towards it. This is evident in the literature of captivity and redemption, which primarily focused on the suffering of Christianity and Christians (14). The Bishop "Bossuet" addressed the capital of Algeria, saying, "You will fall under the feet of your conqueror, you say, O Algeria, rich with your spoils from Christianity. 'I am the blackness of the seas and nations, they are my prey.' Your fleet's lightness filled you with self-confidence, but you will be attacked in your own home, like an eagle hunting in its nest, among the rugged rocks. 'You are like Sidon, the capital of the Phoenicians in Lebanon, but it fell into the depths of the sea.'" (15)

Grami also describes Algeria as a "catastrophe and calamity for the Christian

world, terrifying Europe, the epicenter of piracy..." (16)

From these statements, we can conclude that the issue of Christian prisoners contributed to the crystallization of religious animosity against Algeria. However, the German scholar Humboldt contradicts this view by mentioning that the number of Christian prisoners was small in the city of Algeria, and they received good treatment and were under the protection of states that were at peace with the Ottomans (17).

Statistics indicate that the 17th century was considered the century of piracy, associated with the increasing loot, including prisoners (18). However, the number of prisoners began to decrease in the mid-17th century. Their number was over 20,000 captives, then it gradually decreased to 2,000 prisoners in 1792, and further decreased to 1,200 prisoners in 1800 (19).

By comparing these figures, the researcher MunirMarouche concludes that at the peak of Algerian naval development in the 17th century, the number of prisoners did not exceed 20,000 at most, while in Spain, the number of prisoners reached 100,000. This refutes the prevailing myth (20).

This indicates a common tendency to elevate their own people and belittle others, as human rights and citizenship, in their understanding, do not include all humans but rather refer to the civilized European. It has become one of the great scandals that disturbs the European conscience to be subjected to captivity, while the slave trade reached its peak in Europe (21).

Europe, since the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, turned towards abolishing the slave trade



and prohibiting it in the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and the Congress of La Celle-Saint-Cloud. They sent a representative to the Dey of Algeria to prohibit slavery, but he refused because he was not present at the conference (22).

Although France did not contribute along with England and the Netherlands, on August 2, 1816, the French Foreign Minister ordered Consul Dufaure to stay away from the discussions and all events that would result from the arrival of the fleet (23). However, during the blockade, they used the "Christian Captives" card to halt military operations. The conditions stated: the abolition of the enslavement of Christians and the liberation of all Christian slaves who were still within Algerian territory (24).

2. Manifestations of the religious dimension in the French campaign against Algeria

It can be seen in the statements and positions of religious figures, politicians, and military personnel. These revolved around the necessity of returning the peoples of North Africa to the Christian religion, considering it to be the religion of their ancestors. This can be inferred from some statements, such as their claim that "Islam forcefully stripped them of that [Christianity], but today the Christian religion is capable of reclaiming them and uniting them with us as one people." Additionally, it is stated that "the Christianization of Islamic peoples falls within the framework of European political interests and the aspirations of the Church and Christian thought in general. (25)"

Thus, this religious foundation was sought to be implemented, according to Abu al-QasimSaadallah, by both religious and secular figures (politicians and military

personnel). The stance of religious figures can be inferred from the statements of "Bugeaud," who said, "God named Himself the God of armies and battles. Societies can only progress through blood and suffering. The goal of our war in Algeria is nobler and more honorable than all our European wars, as it is related to the cause of the sacred civilization, the everlasting cause of Christian thought. God has promised the Kingdom of the World to Christianity, and divine care has entrusted to it the honor of carrying out a campaign to the genius of France.(26)"

The prominent role played by Bishop Frisonus, the Minister of Religious Affairs, in urging King Charles X to invade Algeria is also evident. He saw it as a significant service and a fundamental factor in saving Christianity (27). Likewise, the position of Father "Duban-Loup" is highlighted, as he incites to continue the French campaign, saying, "Advance, French troops! Raise the Cross in "Hippo" Annaba! Liberate Syria! Return Constantinople to Christ! My enthusiastic patriotism praises this faintly remembered peasant, this brilliant general, this just war (the Algerian War), this modern army. With sacrifice, genius, and progress, France advances. With all these titles, I salute the honor of the French army in Africa. France has received from his hands a territory (Algeria) that can be the most beautiful colony in the world and one of the noblest aspirations of Christian civilization. (28)"

The role of the religious dimension in supporting the French campaign in Algeria is further evident from the statement of the Archbishop of Paris after the occupation of the city of Algiers, "Monsieur, how many dignities converge in one! What subject is more deserving of our gratitude and



admiration than what Your Majesty is currently doing in the house of God and at the feet of the statue of Mary? France has taken revenge for herself and realized that she can rely on you again, whether in proclaiming her glory or achieving her happiness... Humanity has triumphed over barbarism, and the Cross has prevailed over the Crescent... Now, the songs of faith echo in the African deserts... O son of Saint Louis, what greater legitimacy is there than to satisfy and empty your noble and honorable heart? Thus, the powerful God helped the Christian monarch, the pious king who sought His assistance. His hand is with you, Your Majesty.(29)"

The politicians' position is evident in the statements and stances of the king and his ministers, which clearly demonstrate their desire to introduce Algeria into the realm of Christianity. French Minister of War, Clermont-Tonnère, stated, "It is not strange to see divine providence urging the king, the heir of Saint Louis, to avenge humanity, religion, and personal insults. Can't we, in the future, educate the locals and convert them to Christianity...?"(30) The spirit of the Crusades is also evident in the report presented to the king on October 14, 1827, expressing hopes for the conversion of Algeria. Some passages in the report provocatively address the king, stating, "Fate has decreed that Your Majesty would be honored through your consul by the most ardent enemies of the Christian name... " and "Divine providence wanted Your Majesty to punish the enemies of Christianity." (31)

The king addressed all bishops of the kingdom, saying, "Our desire is for you to organize prayers in all churches, praying to God to protect the flag and grant us victory.(32)" He clearly stated in his throne speech on March 2, 1830, that the objective

of the French campaign was for the benefit of Christianity, thanks to divine providence (33).

The religious nature is also evident in the stance of the press and the king's opponents of Islam. General De Bourmont wrote a publication in Arabic to distribute among the Algerians, stating that the campaign aimed to eliminate the dey and promising the inhabitants, "We will ensure the respect of your wealth, all your properties, and your sacred religion." This statement caused a major uproar and was considered a clear step backward. The newspaper *Le Courrier Français* expressed its rejection of the description used for Islam (34). This is also evident in the letter from King Charles X to Prime Minister Polignac on June 8, 1830, in which he emphatically rejected describing the Islamic religion as holy (35).

Furthermore, it is evident through the positions and statements of General De Bourmont, the leader of the French campaign in Algeria, when he brought sixteen priests with him, including Father Zakar the Syrian and the Patriarch of Jerusalem's brother (36). When they captured the city of Algiers, he addressed his soldiers, saying, "You have renewed the Crusaders' covenant (37)." This contradicted the terms of the surrender treaty he himself had signed with Dey Hussein. Only six days after the treaty was signed, he ordered the performance of religious prayer in the citadel and the placement of a cross on top of a building in the city (38). He sent a description of the celebration held in the citadel's courtyard, which included the following statement: "...With this act, we have opened a gateway for Christianity on the shores of Africa, and we hope that this act will mark the beginning of the



prosperity of civilization that has disappeared in those lands..."(39)

However, after General Clauzel replaced Deprémon as the leader, and with the emergence of Algerian resistance, the military did not directly adopt the approach of proselytizing in the early years. There was a difference in this regard between the clergy who wanted direct confrontation and challenging of Muslims, using the army and authority as cover, while civilian and military officials wanted to avoid confrontation and adopt a peaceful and gradual infiltration strategy to achieve the same goal (40). Consequently, they dealt with society based on how religion could be exploited to serve the interests of the colonial administration. This effort was based on the studies of orientalists, led by "Sylvester Sassi," and consequently, they dealt with Islam from two perspectives:

First: It is a religion of stability and a consolidating factor that can be used within the framework of subjugating the people temporarily to French sovereignty.

Second: The perceived threat of French interests in Algeria due to the bias of its adherents (41).

This made the colonial administration try to limit the enthusiasm of religious authorities, especially open evangelists. For example, "Vallée" refused to grant the position of director of the Algerian seminary to religious men, justifying his stance by saying, "Our special situation in Africa and the numerous obstacles do not allow us to entrust the position to a Catholic or Protestant because it would arouse suspicion among the population, who already reject places with religious influence, at a time when we seek to bring the children of parents to our institutions as

a means of convergence and assimilation in the future."(42)

In a letter sent by "Sault" to "Savary," he stated, "Our desire to spread the principles of Christianity contributes to our efforts to advance civilization. However, I can only warn you of the danger of propaganda openly supported by the authorities, as such behavior can only alienate the Muslim population, who are already committed to their own creed and are disturbed by the establishment of a foreign religion in their midst." (43)

The colonial administration relied on the implementation of its strategy through some newspapers, such as "Al-Mubashir" newspaper, which was edited by a group of orientalists, including Baron Dusslan. When studying various issues of the newspaper, one immediately notices as if it were a newspaper speaking on behalf of an Islamic authority, due to the frequent use of religious terminology, such as "Insha'Allah" (God willing), "Qada' Allah waQadrh" (God's will and decree), and others. Furthermore, it often quoted from the Holy Quran, seeking to convince Algerians that the French presence in their country was a divine decree, and thanks to Allah, France would remain in Algeria. It could never leave this territory except by the will of Allah (44).

Similarly, the idea of issuing a fatwa from prominent Muslim scholars in Al-Azhar Mosque, Al-Qairawan, and the Grand Mosque in Mecca, prohibiting Algerian Muslims from fighting Christians, was intended to disperse the Muslim congregation around Emir Abd al-Qadir and isolate him from them (45).

Therefore, we have clearly observed this religious ideology that accompanied



politicians, military personnel, and religious figures who worked to empower it in Algeria, each with their own strategy.

The French administration also worked to devalue the sanctity of Islamic sites. This is evident in the statements of Drouet-Fleury (1831, 1833) on December 24, 1832, when he said, "...we must turn the most beautiful mosques in Algeria into temples for the Christian God," pointing his finger towards Ketchaoua Mosque (built by Hassan Pasha in 1794) (46). Since the mosque is considered the primary symbol and embodiment of Islam, the French administration waged a war against it. Some mosques were converted into churches, while others were transformed into military barracks, stables, or hospitals. Some mosques were completely closed or destroyed. If we examine the number of mosques closed by the French administration in the first half of the occupation, it would reveal the extent of Crusader hostility towards Islam. The number of places of worship in the city of Algeria decreased from 186 (including 13 large mosques, 108 small mosques, 32 congregational mosques, and 12 zaouias) (47) to only twelve mosques remaining (48).

Among the mosques that were converted into churches, we mention Ketchaoua Mosque, which was turned into the Algiers Cathedral on December 24, 1832, and was named the Church of Saint Philip. It underwent significant internal changes while maintaining its external appearance. Similarly, the Mosque of El Kebir was converted into the Church of the Holy Cross, and the Mosque of Betchine became the Church of Our Lady of Victory (49). Some mosques were repurposed for non-religious uses. For example, the SidiRahi Mosque was given to the central pharmacy

in 1833 and then demolished. The Mosque of Lady Maryam was given to the military administrator and then demolished. The Ali Khodja Mosque was given to the military authorities in 1830 and then demolished. The Subat al-Hut Mosque became our grain warehouse, then a military barracks, and was eventually demolished (50). The list goes on, and there were mosques that were demolished from the very beginning, such as the Mosque of Lady (51) and the Mosque of the Dyers, and so on (52).

Due to the importance of Waqf (religious endowment) institutions, the French administration worked gradually to eliminate them after studying their significance by French researchers and scholars. Some of them described them by saying, "... Waqf institutions contradict the colonial policy and conflict with the economic principles on which the French colonial presence in Algeria is based." (53)

Waqf is an established Islamic system that holds social, economic, and scientific importance in society. Muslims established it to provide funds, housing, and other assistance to scholars, students, the poor, and to maintain institutions such as water sources, roads, zawiyas (Sufi lodges), and domes (54). There were numerous and diverse waqf institutions in Algeria. In the city of Algiers alone, there were around 2,600 public waqf properties on the eve of the occupation (55).

Consequently, the waqf lands were liquidated through a series of decrees and laws, including the decision made on September 8, 1830, which was not implemented until December 7, 1830. It resulted in the incorporation of the properties of the Anarcharianswaqf, the Mecca and Medina waqf, and the waqf of



charitable pathways, etc., into the domain of the state (state properties) (56).

The civil agent Bichon mentions that the army seized 55 properties belonging to the Mecca and Medina waqf during the period between 1830 and 1832, as well as 11 properties belonging to the Great Mosque waqf. (57)

Now, what about the fate of Quranic schools and zawiyas? Abu al-QasimSaadallah mentioned that Quranic schools faced the same fate as the mosques affiliated with them, such as the Qashash School, and the zawiyas also suffered destruction, such as the QashashZawiya, the Sidi al-JoudiZawiya, which was sold to one of the settlers, and the SherfaZawiya, and the list goes on. The disregard for religious institutions was not limited to that, even cemeteries were not spared from the oppression of the colonizers, who showed no respect for sanctity, religious principles, or the feelings of Muslims. They even violated the provisions of the surrender treaty. Here, we mention the scandal of smuggling human bones from Algeria to Marseille for use in bone charcoal and sugar whitening (58).

Since their arrival, the French have sought to Christianize the Algerian surroundings using all means to achieve their goals. Among the actions they took was the search and excavation of Christian artifacts, relying on myths and legends. One of those myths claims that the Great Mosque was built on a Christian religious structure, so they exposed its foundations in hopes of discovering traces of that structure (59).

They also claimed that the New Mosque or Hanafi Mosque was built by a Christian named Abd, who was ordered to build a mosque but instead built a church. They

attributed to him the statement "...when the Christians occupy this city, they will have this mosque as a church." (60)

The real efforts to Christianize the Algerian surroundings began with the Christianization of the Ketchaoua Mosque and the establishment of the Bishopric of Algiers on August 8, 1838. This included the conversion of mosques into churches, as previously mentioned (61).

The manifestations of Christianization in the Algerian surroundings are clearly evident in the accomplishments left by Dubois during his stay in Algeria from 1838 to 1845. These included 60 churches and temples, 16 religious institutions, 40 orphanages, 91 priests, and 140 individuals involved in religious affairs, including seminary students (62).

One of the notable events in this context is the story of the Christianization of Aisha, the daughter of Muhammad. It demonstrates the goals of Christian invasion and the collusion between religious figures and the state. Aisha was legally married, but when she divorced her husband, she was supposed to observe the waiting period (iddah) at her family's home. However, she stayed with a Jewish friend out of fear of her family's punishment, as she was also in an illicit relationship with a European man, believed to be Pelissier de Reynaud, the author of "Histoire de l'Algérie" (History of Algeria). Her family became suspicious and reported her to Judge Abdelaziz and the mufti Mustafa bin Al-Kababati, demanding her return for the waiting period. The judge brought her, with the approval of the Governor-General Fauré, but then Pelissier intervened. The judge Abdelaziz and the mufti bin Al-Kababati had no choice but to leave the court. They both resigned and



presented their resignations to the Governor-General. After that, Pelissier took Aisha to a Catholic priest in a church, and the priest baptized her, defying all sentiments, despite the protests of her relatives and the public (63).

Furthermore, the French authorities also granted licenses to numerous religious associations to operate in Algeria in order to achieve their goals. Among them were the Association of Sisters of Saint Vincent de Paul, working in the province of Algiers, the Association of Sisters of Saint Joseph de Monastir (64), and the Association of Brothers of Saint Jean, working in the province of Oran. The aim of these associations was to have a moral influence on the population through healing and charitable works, such as cleanliness, order, and good treatment (65).

Bishop Dubois also attempted to steer Algerians away from the Islamic religion and bring them back to the religion of their ancestors. He offered 20 French francs per week to every Algerian who attended religious recitations at the church and 50 francs to every Algerian who accepted baptism. He also designated Mondays and Thursdays as days for making charitable donations in front of the Bishopric (66).

In conclusion

we can deduce that the religious dimension in the French campaign in Algeria emerged through the alliance of the church with politicians driven by eternal Crusader hatred against Islam, which is considered a unifying and powerful factor that brings together various segments of Algerian society. Therefore, they spared no effort to combat it, starting from the preparation for the campaign to the invasion, and the destruction, obliteration, and containment of the components of the Islamic religion.

They even went further by exploiting Islam to serve France's interests and ensure its continuity by pressuring the sheikhs and imams to issue fatwas betraying anyone who dared to deviate from the ruler and promoting ideas of Qadarism and others. The religious dimension manifested itself in all political, cultural, religious, social, and economic practices.

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