

## The distinctive dimensions of the personality of the Emir Abdelkader al-Jazairi (Algerian)(1808-1883). Spiritual and humanitarian side against military and warlike side

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### **Abstract**

Emir Abdelkader of Algeria stands among the historical figures who left a conspicuous imprint through his military and political struggle against the French colonial occupation. Yet, it is his spiritual depth, advocacy of religious tolerance, and humane treatment of prisoners that inspire admiration and respect, highlighting his ethical leadership and moral integrity.

**Keywords:** Emir Abdelkader; France; dialogue of civilisations; religious tolerance; military planning.

### **Introduction**

Writing on the figure of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria lies at the very heart of the historian's task, for he is a personality endowed with several characteristics and distinguishing features, among them that he was the founder of the modern Algerian state and a political, military, and diplomatic figure, in addition to being a poet, a man of letters, and a man of religion, with wisdom, asceticism, sufism,

and jurisprudence. This personality requires the historian to continually reread the various historical writings that have addressed his biography, struggle, and resistance to colonialism. Among the qualities that rarely coexist with others is political shrewdness: he was a statesman par excellence. He was also distinguished by his military strength and the skill of his war plans, which demonstrated the man's competence and caliber during battles against the coloniser. We also discern in his character a religious and moral spirit, such as his concern for learning and his observance of the conformity of conduct with Islamic law, in addition to the constant presence of ethics in his behaviour and dealings such as humility, asceticism, Sufism, tolerance towards those who differ, engagement with the Other, the renunciation of violence, the dialogue of civilisations, and the creation of peace and coexistence among peoples and races.

## Significance of the Study

Through this study, we aim to foster pride and a deeper appreciation of Emir Abdelkader's legacy in resistance, state-building, and interfaith dialogue, emphasizing his enduring influence on civilizational values and peaceful coexistence.

- Revealing other aspects and dimensions of Emir Abdelkader's personality.
- Highlighting manifestations of distinction and excellence in Emir Abdelkader's personality.
- Enrich the history of Emir Abdelkader with new studies, away from classical studies that focus on the political or military dimension, and always separate them from the spiritual dimension of Emir Abdelkader.

## Research Problem:

The history of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria is multifaceted and uneven in its levels, connected to his Sufi family and his zawiya in Mascara, and subsequently to his jihad and resistance against the French for eighteen years. It was then linked to the ordeal of his captivity and imprisonment in France and to his profound, constructive dialogue with Christian priests in France. It became even more compelling after his move to Damascus and his engagement with various religious, political, economic, and juristic issues in Greater Syria, from his heroic role in protecting the Christians of the Levant to his rejection and awareness of the dangers posed by the Arab Kingdom project aimed at fragmenting the Ottoman Caliphate and dismembering its territories to his role in Sufi and scholarly

efflorescence emanating from his home and from the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. Accordingly, this study seeks to shed light on the multiple, interwoven aspects of this topic, which are often contentious and the subject of debate. The research problem is therefore as follows:

How did the religious, scholarly, and social background shape Emir Abdelkader's personality in his dealings with the Other (France, Morocco, the Christian West, the Ottoman state), politically, militarily, civilisationally, and ethically?

### **Methodology:**

The study adopts the historical method of tracing historical events, describing the course of events in their chronological sequence, and analysing historical, social, and religious data to identify the most important features of Emir Abdelkader's multifaceted, richly experienced personality: the leader of jihad against the French in Algeria; the one who practised tolerance towards Christians and engaged them in dialogue in Algeria and France; then, the protector of Christians in Greater Syria; and the loyal subject of the Ottoman sultan.

### **First: Emir Abdelkader of Algeria and His Political Shrewdness:**

- He is Emir Abdelkader ibn Muhyi al-Din, known as Abdelkader of Algeria. He was born in the village of al-Qaytina, near the city of Mascara, in western Algeria, on Tuesday, 6 September 1808, corresponding to 15 Rajab 1223 AH. He was a political and military leader and a mujahid known for his war against the French occupation of Algeria. He led a popular resistance that lasted fifteen years during the early stages of France's invasion of Algeria. He is also regarded as the initiator and founder of the modern Algerian state and as a historical and global symbol of Algerian resistance to French colonialism.

Researchers are almost unanimous in their assessment of the greatness of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria, his military superiority, and his political shrewdness, in light of the status he attained through long phases of struggle, which placed him at the summit of heroism and glory. If we inquire into the source of Emir's greatness, we find it in two matters: one innate and natural, and the other circumstantial and acquired.

For the innate and natural, it lies in his being the son of a noble family of distinguished lineages and excellent standing in western Algeria, of honourable origins: his father, Sidi Muhyi al-Din, was the shaykh of the Qadiriyya order in western Algeria and one of the leading opponents of Ottoman rule in Oran. For the circumstantial and acquired, they lie in his having been educated in the family zawiya, in his travels, learning, pilgrimage, and residence in Hijaz, as well as in his visit to several countries on his return journey. He then returned to Algeria and led fierce wars and violent battles for seventeen years against imperial France, its organised army, and its experienced forces across the continents, most recently in the Napoleonic Wars.

This helped refine Emir Abdelkader's genius and develop his martial capability and military expertise. The brief period of peace that followed the Treaty of Tafna also enabled Emir Abdelkader to lay the first foundations of his state (1837–1839), establishing a tightly structured administrative organisation based on the khalifa system.<sup>1</sup> (provinces). This division is evidence of the political astuteness the man possessed, helping ensure that the Emir's orders and instructions reached the popular base.<sup>2</sup> At the outset, his state was administratively divided into two provinces:

1. **The Province of Tlemcen:** Its governor was Muhammad al-Buhamidi al-Walhasi; upon his death, al-Hajj Mustafa ibn Ahmad al-Tihami was appointed to govern it.
2. **The Province of Mascara:** This was dedicated to the administration of central authority,<sup>3</sup> and Muhammad ibn Friha al-Mahhaji<sup>4</sup> was appointed over it.
3. **The Province of Miliana:** Under the leadership of Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Allal al-Qulay'i, then Muhammad ibn 'Allal.
4. **The Province of al-Titteri:** Under the leadership of Mustafa ibn Muhyi al-Din, then Muhammad al-Burkani.
5. **The Province of Medjana:** Supervised by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Salam al-Muqrani, then Muhammad al-Kharubi.
6. **The Province of al-Ziban and the Eastern Sahara:** Under the leadership of Farhat ibn Sa'id, then Lahsan ibn 'Azuz, it extended from the borders of the eastern Hodna to Biskra and the eastern oases.
7. **The Province of Bordj Hamza:** Under the leadership of Ahmad ibn Salim al-Disi.
8. **The province specific to the Sahara region:** Under the command of Qaddur ibn 'Abd al-Baqi.

The province was, in turn, divided into districts, and each district was divided into administrative units. Emir Abdelkader established a consultative council (*shūrā* council) composed of eleven (11) members from all regions,<sup>5</sup> namely, Ahmad ibn al-Tihami, Abdelkader ibn Krush, 'Abd Allah Saqqat al-Musharafi, Tahir al-Mahfuzzi, Ahmad ibn al-Tahir ibn al-Shaykh al-Musharafi, Muhammad ibn al-Mukhtar al-War'i, and Ibrahim ibn al-Qadi. . . .<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the Emir added representative councils and their prerogatives to the *shūrā* councils, namely, assisting the central administration and supporting the provinces in carrying out their tasks in accordance with the provisions of Islamic law.<sup>7</sup> The officials were appointed from among the senior leaders, appointed by Emir Abdelkader for an unspecified term. They possessed broad authority: in times of peace, they were concerned with collecting taxes and overseeing the aghas and caids; in times of war, however, they became military commanders who managed the affairs of war, from organising operations to preparing the populace for combat.

Emir Abdelkader's political shrewdness is also evident in his formation of the state's government, which consists of a set of ministerial posts held by holders typically distinguished by experience, political skill, and military competence.<sup>8</sup>

The Emir made the city of Mascara his principal seat, owing to the geographical advantages of the area, such as its being surrounded by his mother tribe (al-Hashm/Banu Hashim), its distance from the sea and from French threats emanating from Oran, and its proximity to the regions of Relizane, Sidi Bel Abbès, and Oran in western Algeria (a strategically important location).

Another aspect of his political shrewdness was that he reserved the post of prime minister for himself. For the judiciary, he did not establish a separate ministry; instead, he personally supervised it. He appointed competent scholars (jurists) throughout his state to oversee the judicial apparatus in accordance with Islamic law so that justice might prevail among the people.<sup>9</sup> He also dispatched heralds (*al-barrāhīn*) to the markets and to tribal localities to announce to the people: "Whoever has a complaint against the khalifa, the agha, the commander, or the shaykh, let him submit it to the Emir's diwan without mediation, for the Emir will grant him justice against his oppressor. In addition, if wrongdoing befalls someone and he does not bring his grievance to the Emir, let him blame none but himself."<sup>10</sup>

The seat of judicial authority, represented by the chief judge, "Ahmad ibn Hashimi al-Waradi," was in Mascara. In contrast, subordinate judges were divided into military judges and civil judges and were found throughout the administrative provinces. In each province, there was a judge who adjudicated the various cases,<sup>11</sup> relying on the Maliki school (the principal school of the state), in addition to the Hanafi and Ibadi schools, to consider the particularities of each region.

Emir Abdelkader set the khalifa's stipend at 110 duro (550 francs) and, in addition, a *ṣā'* of barley each day to enable them to fulfil their duty towards their many guests, whom their position brought to them without interruption. The aghas' stipend was a tenth of all revenues, either in cash or in kind.

### **Second: Emir's Military Genius and Strategic Planning**

Emir Abdelkader derived the foundations of politics and the arts of combat from his father, and he likewise benefited from the battles he fought against the enemy. In this sphere, the Emir possessed political shrewdness and military expertise that surpassed all bounds, placing the enemy in predicaments and exposing it to dangers and perils, despite the multiplicity of its plots and the abundance of its equipment and workforce.

The first matter the Emir considered, upon founding his state amid the realities that Algeria was experiencing, was how to make his state strong enough to confront its enemies. To achieve this, it was necessary to equip military power armies and matériels according to a well-devised strategy.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, the Emir convened a general council of statesmen and the notables and leaders of the populace and delivered to them a sermon in which he made clear the benefits and advantages of a regular army. He informed them that he had resolved to organise a sufficient number of troops to fight the enemy. All those present agreed to his request, and the herald went out to the market, saying:

"Let those present convey to those absent that an order has been issued by our lord, the Defender of the Faith, to renew the soldiery and organise the troops from all the nation. Whoever wishes to enter under the Muhammadan banner and to be encompassed by the glory of order, let him hasten to the House of the Emirate in Mascara to have his name recorded in the Emir's registers."<sup>13</sup>

Through our reading of most historical works, Emir's martial strength becomes evident in the way he prepared his army, "the Muhammadan banner." He personally undertook its training, organisation, and supervision, given the supreme practical importance of this sector, upon which the strength, dignity, and impregnability of the state depended. He also instituted a military code detailing discipline, salaries, and soldiers' uniforms.<sup>14</sup>

The historian Abu al-Qasim Sa'd Allah noted that Emir organised his army in accordance with the arrangements characteristic of modern armies, drawing on contemporary trainers, several of whom were foreigners. The army was divided into three branches:

1. **Infantry:** Divided into hundreds, with each hundred headed by a commander with two assistants. This branch was called "the Muhammadan Army" (al-'askar al-muhammadi') and was under the authority of a commander appointed by the Emir. Among the most prominent were Qaddur ibn Bahr, Abdelkader ibn 'Izz al-Din, Muhammad al-Sanusi, Salim al-Zanji, and Ahmad al-Ghadiri.
2. **Cavalry:** Composed of squadrons, each squadron consists of fifty horse riders. The regimens were each composed of one thousand horse riders under the command of an agha appointed by Emir himself.<sup>15</sup>

In wartime and major engagements, Emir Abdelkader divided his army into a vanguard, a rearguard, a left wing, a right wing, and a centre, an approach formerly used by Muslim conquerors. This indicates Emir's familiarity with biographical and historical works on Islamic history.

From our review of the most important writings that addressed the military dimension of Emir's state, we have arrived at the following:

1. The adversary's situation before an attack is studied through informants and spies.
2. Reconnoitring the enemy's forward areas and conducting skirmishes for deception and camouflage, so that the enemy would not ascertain the true forces of Emir Abdelkader.
3. Organising the army prior to the decisive confrontation and distributing tasks among his deputies.
4. Surprising the enemy by relying on the speed of horse riders and cavalry.

### Third: The Scholar's Humility

In reading Emir's letter to al-Tasūlī, presented in the form of questions, we perceived the scholar's humility in the way the questions are posed. This is attributable to the fact that Emir Abdelkader was deeply versed in matters of religion; he was among those most committed to the religious dimension in ethics and conduct and to acting in accordance with its sound principles, alongside his sustained efforts to consolidate religion among the various strata of the people by all means and material resources.

There is no doubt that his profound adherence to religious principles made Emir keen to seek legal opinions from people to clarify what is right and reject what is false. To that end, he wrote several letters to scholars in Morocco and Egypt. Among these letters is his enquiry addressed to the Moroccan Sultan 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Hisham concerning the Algerian question and the internal and external difficulties and obstacles that confronted Emir Abdelkader's resistance to French colonialism.

The cultural level of Emir may be regarded as bright and vigorous despite the state of war; the credit is due to the zawiyyas and scholars and jurists for the lessons and admonitions they provided to enlighten society. To preserve this level, Emir Abdelkader, while organising his administration, directed particular attention to regulating education and encouraging students to pursue learning by extending it across various tribes, opening schools to teach children acts of worship and prayer, and encouraging the memorisation of the Qur'an. The Emir would reward them for their activities and attend their gatherings.<sup>16</sup> This stemmed from his disposition as a man of learning and a man of religion. Among the privileges specific to scholars and jurists:

- Allocating stipends for them according to their learning and ranks and exempts them from taxation.
- Pardon them in cases where they were criminals and sentenced to death.
- Issuing orders requiring that they be respected and exempted from all forms of service.
- Honouring the gifted by respecting them in the discipline they practise and disregarding those who are negligent in it.

The Moroccan researcher Muhammad Amin also addressed, in his book *Studies in the History of Modern Algeria*, the letter of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria to the Moroccan Sultan Abd al-Rahman ibn Hisham.<sup>17</sup> This letter contains various questions, which the Moroccan sultan forwarded to the scholar and jurist Ali ibn 'Abd al-Salam al-Tasūlī, one of the scholars of Fez (1836–1837).<sup>18</sup>

The importance of the manuscript lies in its demonstrating Emir's capacity to pose questions with sound methodology and in elucidating emergent issues connected to political, economic, social, and cultural life and to religion's stance towards them.

Reference to this manuscript appears in two important works regarded as among the most significant printed and published sources in modern history for both Algeria and Morocco, namely, *Tuhfat al-Za'ir fi Tarikh al-Jaza'ir wa al-Amir Abdelkader*, in two volumes, authored by Emir Muhammad ibn Abdelkader of Algeria, and *al-Istiqla li-Akhbar Duwal al-Maghrib al-Aqsa*, authored by Shaykh Abu al-'Abbas Ahmad ibn Khalid al-Nasiri.<sup>19</sup> The manuscript is considered among the most important compositions in the field of writings related to Islamic governance (juridic "cases" (al-nawāzil al-fiqhiyya)).

The author of the manuscript, Abu al-Hasan 'Ali ibn 'Abd al-Salam al-Tasūlī, known by the epithet Madīdīsh. 'Abd al-Kabir ibn Hisham al-Kattani described him as "the standard-bearer of the Maliki school in Morocco. . . the editor and verifier of *nawāzil*, the most just judge. . . possessing the upper hand in the science of *nawāzil* and legal rulings and characterised by piety, asceticism, and scrupulousness. . . ."<sup>20</sup>

The text of the question (line 24) is, in itself, an important document that records a critical phase in the history of the armed resistance led by Emir Abdelkader against French colonialism in western Algeria.<sup>21</sup>

We discern the scholar's humility through his use of juristic and doctrinal terminology addressed to the Moroccan sultan. The text of the letter clarifies the extent of Morocco's cooperation with his resistance, as the question reveals the nobility of the questioner's character in the way the questions were posed. Indeed, the text of the question almost reflects all that we have indicated above, as shown below:

“... Your response may God preserve you concerning that by which the matter has become grave and the distress intense in the land of Algeria, which has become islets for the ravens of unbelief; for the unbelieving enemy seeks to rule over the Muslims and to enslave them, sometimes by the sword and sometimes by the cords of their politics. Among the Muslims are those who collude with them and pledge allegiance to them and who bring them horses; neither is there lacking among their informants who observe them. In addition, among the neighbouring Arab tribes there are those who do so, and they abound in denial and repudiation... What is the ruling concerning one who refrains from defending honour and children, when the deputy of the Imam calls the people to defence and jihad (?) ... Are they to be punished, and how is their punishment (?) ... In addition, is the one who withholds assistance to be considered a rebel or not (?) ...”

The letter's content reveals the difficulties Emir faced in 1835, following the De Michiel Treaty and the Treaty of Tafna of 1837. Through our reading of the substance of the letter, we observe that Emir passed through difficult circumstances that compelled him to seek material and moral support from the Sultan of Morocco.

We also note the scholar's humility in posing questions to the scholar al-Tasūlī. The Emir employed precise and detailed expressions that explained the circumstances through which the resistance was passing. This is evident in the text of the question:

“... The seventh section concerns the prohibition of leaving the subjects to their own devices, and the manner of the Imam's conduct with his subjects and with the officials under his authority. The answer included what was contained in Emir's question, in which he said: 'Or are they to be left in their condition?' by which is meant the aforementioned tribes and the actions in which they were engaged ...”<sup>22</sup>

The answers to the question were presented with the utmost precision, addressing Emir's questions in turn. They were also set forth, supported by evidence from Qur'anic verses, Prophetic hadiths, the statements of earlier scholars, and exempla drawn from the history of Islam and other nations.

Similarly, Emir Abdelkader adopted an honourable stance on interreligious dialogue and on tolerance towards the Other, who differs and disagrees. He is therefore regarded as among the

earliest to put into practice this kind of humanitarian peace in coexistence, something he applied in concrete terms by protecting Christians in Damascus in 1861.

### **Conclusion:**

The multifaceted nature of Emir Abdelkader's personality and life experience—ranging from armed resistance (martial jihad) to negotiation and dialogue with French authorities, and subsequently to interreligious engagement marked by calls for tolerance and the renunciation of violence toward the peaceful Other—reflects a remarkable ethical and intellectual evolution. The predominance of religious spirituality, moral conduct, Sufi principles, tolerance, and asceticism in Emir Abdelkader's actions and correspondence with adversaries, monarchs, and scholars alike endowed him with a unique moral authority. Collectively, these dimensions positioned Emir Abdelkader as a distinguished and influential figure in modern and contemporary history. These dimensions explain Emir's upbring and the social milieu in which he was raised: the family's deep-rooted lineage and its fidelity to its noble and sacred descent; the presence and effectiveness of the zawiya's role in providing moral formation, spiritual refinement, and the encouragement of ethical conduct; and Emir Abdelkader's inclinations directed primarily towards Sufism, contemplation, and the religious sciences. For this reason, Emir would always repeat that he was a man created for learning, not for war. However, God's will, which decreed the French seizure of Algeria, led him to temporarily turn from learning, jurisprudence, and contemplation to war, planning, and negotiation. Despite what the French aggression against his country, Algeria, and against his own person after treachery, captivity, and imprisonment had brought about, he stood to protect the Christians who had been his enemies the day before and received them in his house in Damascus, thereby demonstrating the nobility of his character, the strength of his personality, and the truthfulness of the claims he had so often repeated, written, and disseminated.

### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Nasser Eddine Saidouni, *Asr al-Amir Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi* (Kuwait: Muassasat Abd al-Aziz Saud al-Babtain lil-Ibda, 2000), 213.

<sup>2</sup> Abdallah Maqlati, *Fi Judhur al-Thawra al-Jazairiya: Muqawamat al-Musta'mir al-Mustamirra min al-Ihtilal ila 1 Nufambar 1954*, vol. 1 (Algiers: Shams al-Ziban lil-Nashr, 2011), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Ismail al-Arabi, *al-Amir Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi: Muassis al-Dawla wa-Qa'id al-Jaysh* (Algiers: al-Sharika al-Wataniyya lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi, Wizara al-Thaqafa al-Arabiyya, 2007), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Yahya Bouaziz, *al-Amir Abd al-Qadir: Ra'id al-Kifah al-Jazairi* (Algiers: al-Dar al-Arabiyya lil-Kitab; al-Sharika al-Wataniyya lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi, 1983), 77.

<sup>5</sup> Bouaziz, *al-Amir Abd al-Qadir*, 72.

<sup>6</sup> Bassam al-Asali, *al-Amir Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi (1807–1883)*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Nafa'is, 1983), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Abd al-Qadir Khalifa, “al-Amir Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi min Khilal al-Rihla al-Hijaziyya,” *Majallat al-Turath al-Arabi* 107 (Damascus: Ittihad Kuttab al-Arab, 2007): 18.

<sup>8</sup> al-Sadiq Mazhoud, *Tarikh al-Qudat fi al-Jazair min al-Ahd al-Barbari ila Harb al-Tahrir al-Watani*, 2nd ed. (Algiers: Dar Baha al-Din, 2012), 234.

<sup>9</sup> Ismail al-Arabi, “Hukumat al-Amir Abd al-Qadir—Idaratuha wa-Mahamuha—,” *Majallat al-Thaqafa* 75 (Algiers: al-Sharika al-Wataniyya lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi; Matbaat Ahmad Zabana, 1983): 224.

<sup>10</sup> Rabah Bounar, “Nizam al-Hukm fi Imarat al-Amir,” *Majallat al-Asala* 23 (Algiers: al-Muassasa al-Wataniyya lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi, 2012): 46.

<sup>11</sup> Abd al-Razzaq Ben Sbaa, *al-Amir Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi wa-Adabuhu* (Kuwait: Muassasat Ja'izat Abd al-Aziz Saud al-Babtain lil-Ibda al-Shi'ri, 2000), 23.

<sup>12</sup> Badr al-Din Shaaban, *Aslihat al-Amir Abd al-Qadir (1832–1847): Dirasa Taqniyya wa-Fanniyya* (master's thesis, Qism al-Athar, Jamiat al-Jazair, 2001), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Sbaa, *al-Amir Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi wa-Adabuhu*, 34.

<sup>14</sup> Bruno Etienne, *Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi*, trans. Michel Khoury (Beirut: Dar Atiyya lil-Nashr, 1997), 154.

<sup>15</sup> Mokhtar Hassani, *al-Turath al-Jazairi al-Makhtut fi al-Jazair wa-al-Kharij*, vol. 1 (Algiers: Al-Hadara Publications, 2009), 21.

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad Amin Muhammad, *Dirasat fi Tarikh al-Jazair al-Haditha* (Fez, Morocco: Matbaat Anfu, n.d.), 244.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Khizana al-Amma (Rabat), MS no. 1198, 68 pages.

<sup>18</sup> Muhammad, *Dirasat fi Tarikh al-Jazair al-Haditha*, 246.

<sup>19</sup> Abd al-Kabir ibn Hisham al-Kattani, *Zahrat al-As fi Buyutat Ahl Fas* (Casablanca: New Success Press Publications, 2002), 1:244.

<sup>20</sup> Muhammad, *Dirasat fi Tarikh al-Jazair al-Haditha*, 250.

<sup>21</sup> Muhammad, *Dirasat fi Tarikh al-Jazair al-Haditha*, 252.

<sup>22</sup> Muhammad, *Dirasat fi Tarikh al-Jazair al-Haditha*, 253.

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