

## Features of Sufism in the Life of Emir Abdelkader and His Literary Legacy

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### **Abstract**

Emir Abdelkader is a historic figure who occupies a distinguished place in Algerian history in particular and Arab history in general. He is among the great personalities who forged the glory of the Algerian national resistance against French colonialism, earning a prestigious reputation acknowledged by both his enemies and his allies. He is also one of the few leaders in history who combined the strength of the sword with the power of the pen and intellect. This distinction stemmed from his rich personality, shaped by profound knowledge and diverse experiences, making him an exceptional figure in both war and peace.

The Emir also possessed a Sufi personality that was liberated from the constraints of blind imitation and dependency, while aspiring to the purity and authenticity of Islamic law (Sharia). His life—as a warrior, educator, military leader, and cultural figure—refutes the false accusations often directed by opponents of Sufism against the Sufi tradition.

**Keywords:** Sufism of Emir Abdelkader; the influence of Sufism on the Emir in the scientific and humanitarian fields; the Emir's prose writings during captivity.

## Introduction

Emir Abdelkader of Algeria is widely recognized in Arab historical writings for his heroism and military resistance against French colonialism. The Arab world remembers him as a patriotic leader, a fearless hero, and a devoted fighter in the cause of God. At the same time, Emir Abdelkader represented the ideal Sufi within the Islamic world. Descended from a distinguished Sufi family, he devoted himself to spreading Islamic teachings and implementing the principles of Islamic law with remarkable intelligence, precision, and sound legal reasoning, earning the titles of Imam and Commander.

Several factors guided him toward the Sufi path, and his spiritual journey evolved through different stages. His Sufism profoundly influenced both his scholarly and humanitarian endeavors. Although the years that Emir Abdelkader and his companions spent imprisoned in **Amboise** were the longest and most difficult of their lives, this period also witnessed his greatest literary productivity. This study seeks to highlight that remarkable aspect of his legacy.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following questions:

- What characterized the Sufi life of Emir Abdelkader?
- What prose works did he leave behind?
- Through what stages did his spiritual development progress?

To answer these questions, the study examines the following:

### 1. The Concept and Causes of Sufism in the Thought of Emir Abdelkader

#### A. The Concept of Sufism According to Emir Abdelkader

According to Emir Abdelkader, Sufism consists of adhering faithfully to the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah, motivated by love, longing, and sincere devotion to God and His Messenger (peace and blessings be upon him). Through this devotion, the servant fulfills the proper etiquette of servitude while faithfully carrying out the duties owed to the Divine (1).

The Emir believed that true Sufis are those who remain constantly present with God in all their actions and circumstances. Therefore, he warned against those whose worship is tainted by selfish motives or worldly desires, emphasizing that worship must be performed with complete sincerity for God alone (2).

He referred to the Sufi saints as the Gnostics (al-'Ārifūn) and the People of God (Ahl Allah). In his view, Sufism is founded upon sincere devotion to God and constant awareness of His presence, both in public and in private. Consequently, he regarded the Sufis as the noblest among the various groups of Muslims.(3)

The Sufi inclination of Emir Abdelkader is also reflected in his commitment to embodying noble moral virtues, abandoning vice, and performing all deeds with sincerity. He emphasized that **jihad** must be accompanied by the purification of the soul, through which genuine sincerity in

action is attained. Thus, for Emir Abdelkader, Sufism was both an epistemological vision and a practical way of life, adopted by the rational individual to achieve true civilization (5).

## **B. The Reasons Behind Emir Abdelkader's Sufism**

### **1. His Humanitarian Outlook**

One of the principal reasons for the Emir's embrace of Sufism was his profound humanitarian vision. He regarded humanity as the genuine voluntary bond that should unite him with every human being, whether Eastern or Western, European or Arab, Muslim or Christian (6). Evidence of this humanitarian spirit is found in his unwavering adherence to the principles of Islam, which call for mutual respect among all people. He consistently advocated the protection of human dignity and the intrinsic value of every individual while rejecting racism and discrimination based on religion or ethnicity (7).

His humane treatment of prisoners of war stemmed from his Islamic principles of forgiveness and tolerance. To ensure proper conduct, he issued a national decree regulating the treatment of prisoners after convening a conference attended by his caliphs, aghas, and military commanders. The decree stipulated that every captured French soldier should be regarded as a prisoner of war and treated with exceptional kindness until an exchange could be arranged. It further promised a reward to anyone who safely delivered a French or Christian soldier into custody. Conversely, if a prisoner complained of mistreatment, the reward would be withdrawn and the offender punished. The Emir also prohibited attacks on children, the elderly, women, clergy, and all civilians who had no involvement in combat (8).

### **2. His Descent from the Prophet's Household**

Emir Abdelkader traced his lineage to **Ali ibn Abi Talib**, and his family took great pride in its genealogical connection to the Prophet's Household (*Ahl al-Bayt*). The Emir explained the Qur'anic verse:

*"Indeed, Allah intends only to remove impurity from you, O People of the House, and to purify you completely."* (Qur'an 33:33) (9)

Through his interpretation of this verse, he clarified his understanding of the special status of the Prophet's Household and the divine blessings bestowed upon them through their spiritual purification. This reflects the depth of his pride in and spiritual attachment to this sacred lineage.

The Emir also celebrated his noble ancestry in numerous poems of praise and self-glorification. (10) Among them is his poem "Our Father Is the Messenger of God," which opens with the verse:

Our father is the Messenger of God, the best of all creation;  
Who among mankind could ever rival our noble rank?

### **3. His Religious and Sufi Upbringing**

Emir Abdelkader was raised in a deeply religious environment. As the son of a family associated with **zawiyas** (Sufi lodges) and Sufi orders, he developed a profound belief in divine decree (*qada' wa qadar*). He faithfully followed the Prophetic teaching:

*"To believe in all decrees, whether good or bad, pleasant or bitter." (11)*

This conviction is clearly expressed in the **Treaty** he presented to **Louis-Napoléon**, where he declared:

*"When God commanded me to rise, I rose... but when He commanded me to stop, I stopped. Only then did I relinquish authority and surrender."*

By these words, the Emir affirmed that both his struggle and his surrender were carried out solely in accordance with the will of God (11).

His imprisonment at **Amboise** further strengthened his spiritual inclination. Having laid down his sword and found himself in prolonged isolation, he devoted himself to prayer, remembrance of God (*dhikr*), and spiritual contemplation (13).

## **2. The Historical Stages of Emir Abdelkader's Sufism**

The Emir's Sufism developed through successive historical stages that paralleled the major phases of his life. This spiritual evolution occurred naturally, with each stage bringing a deeper level of knowledge and spiritual maturity. His development may be divided into four principal stages.

### **A. The Stage of Learning, Instruction, and Intellectual Formation (1807–1830)**

This stage extends from the Emir's birth in **Guetna** in 1807 until the French invasion of Algeria (14) in 1830. It encompasses his early life under the guidance of his father in the family **zawiya** (religious school), as well as his formative educational journeys throughout Algeria.

From childhood, the Emir experienced his father's affection, care, and exemplary character. His father sought to instill in him the highest moral principles, noble virtues, and honorable habits while ensuring a comprehensive education. Abdelkader enrolled in his father's school in Guetna, where he learned reading, writing, Islamic jurisprudence, and the Prophetic traditions. By the age of ten, he had memorized the Holy Qur'an. (15)

As a teenager, before reaching the age of fifteen, he traveled to **Arzew**, where he studied under **Sheikh Ahmad ibn al-Tahir**, from whom he acquired knowledge of astronomy, mathematics, and geography, while also gaining insight into European affairs.

In 1820, his father sent him to **Oran** to study at the school of **Ahmad ibn Khuja**, an institution established for the sons of prominent families. During the nearly year-long period he spent there, he broadened his linguistic knowledge, studied the works of **al-Mas'udi** and **Ibn Khaldun**, explored various sciences, deepened his understanding of religion, and refined his literary and poetic talents (16).

The most significant period of this stage appears to be the years **1825–1828**, during which the Emir accompanied his father on the pilgrimage (*Haji*) to Mecca. This eastern journey provided him with the opportunity to observe various Sufi orders firsthand, meet distinguished Sufi masters, learn directly from them, and practice their methods of spiritual discipline and self-purification (17).

After completing the pilgrimage, the Emir and his father traveled to **Baghdad** through **Damascus**, where he was initiated into the **Naqshbandi** order by **Imam Abu al-Baha Diya' al-Din al-Naqshbandi al-Suhrawardi**. He attended his gatherings regularly and benefited from his teachings on Islamic monotheism (*tawhid*) and Sufism (18).

They subsequently continued to **Baghdad**, where they visited the shrine of **Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (19)**, the founder of the **Qadiriyya** order. There, the Emir also received initiation into the Qadiri order from **Sayyid Mahmoud al-Kaylani al-Qadiri**, the **Naqib al-Ashraf** (Chief of the Prophet's Descendants) (20).

During this formative stage, the Emir was deeply devoted to reading the works of the great Sufi masters from an early age, although he had not yet fully embarked upon the Sufi path. While he eagerly studied Sufi literature and received initiation into both the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders in Damascus and Baghdad, his spiritual experience had not yet reached full maturity. Rather, this period represented a stage of intellectual and spiritual preparation. This is evidenced by the absence of any Sufi poetry composed by the Emir during this initial phase of his life (21).

### **B. The Stage of Chivalry (*Futuwwa*) and Frontier Vigil (*Murābaṭa*) (1830–1848)**

From its earliest development, *murābaṭa* (frontier vigilance in defense of Islam) was regarded as a form of jihad in the cause of God. During this stage of his spiritual development, Emir Abdelkader's wars and defensive campaigns against the French represented an expression of this principle after they invaded his homeland and sought to colonize it. The Emir maintained that he did not wage war against France or the French people as such; rather, he fought only those who bore arms against him (22).

The spirit of *futuwwa* (Islamic chivalry) and *murābaṭa* was directed toward resisting aggression, repelling oppression, and liberating the homeland, without resorting to violence against anyone except armed combatants. He refrained from treachery, never violated treaties, and treated captured French commanders, senior officers, and ordinary soldiers with remarkable generosity and dignity. Such conduct reflected the noble spirit known as *futuwwa*, which remained one of the defining characteristics of the Emir throughout this stage of his Sufi life. Indeed, chivalry and magnanimity are among the distinguishing virtues traditionally associated with the great Sufi masters.

This conduct stemmed from the principles of Islamic Sufism, which advocate work, struggle, and the enjoyment of life without excess or aggression. At its core, Islamic Sufism is closely integrated with the practical teachings of Islam, which regard calling others to righteousness, removing injustice, earning a lawful livelihood, and striving diligently on earth as acts of worship. Under this comprehensive doctrine, which unites theoretical worship (knowledge) with

practical worship (jihad in both its greater and lesser forms), Emir Abdelkader elevated his sincere religious commitment to the noble humanitarian ideals embodied in futuwwa and murābaṭa.(23)

### **C. The Stage of Contemplation and Reflection (1848–1852)**

The Emir entered a new spiritual horizon during his imprisonment. Although confined within the narrow walls of his prison, he remained steadfast, sustained alternately by the light of patience and by the hope of eventual freedom. He referred to this period as a *khalwa* (spiritual retreat) in the two hundred and eleventh chapter (*Mawqif*) of his book *Al-Mawāqif*. He regarded his imprisonment as a divine trial through which God tested the depth of his patience and perseverance.

This period of seclusion appears to have provided the Emir, for the first time in his life, with the opportunity for profound Sufi contemplation and tranquil spiritual reflection. He devoted much of his time to the remembrance of God (*dhikr*) and supplication.

This stage occupies a pivotal position in his spiritual development, serving as the bridge between the two earlier stages and the fourth and final stage, during which he would attain the highest degree of Sufi maturity. It was also distinguished by remarkable literary and intellectual productivity (24).

During this period, the Emir became acquainted with the eminent Sufi Muhammad al-Shadhili al-Qusantini. It is highly probable that he studied under him, learned the principles and teachings of the Shadhili order, and engaged with him in discussions on Sufi subjects, in addition to participating in poetic exchanges that took place between them from time to time (25).

### **D. The Stage of Spiritual Maturity and Expression (1853–1883)**

Emir Abdelkader began his life with armed struggle and concluded it, in this fourth and final stage of his spiritual journey, with a greater form of struggle—the jihad of the soul (*jihād al-nafs*). During this period, he immersed himself deeply in the sciences of the Sufi tradition and demonstrated an extraordinary mastery of mystical knowledge, revealing profound spiritual insights that reflected the exalted rank he had attained.

His ascetic lifestyle was evident in his practice of breaking the fast during the month of Ramadan with little more than cakes and raisins. He also maintained a private place of retreat in his residence in the village of Ashrafiyyah, where he devoted himself to worship and spiritual seclusion.

This was the longest stage in the Emir's Sufi development, extending for nearly thirty years. Following his release from imprisonment in Amboise, he spent these years moving through exile outside Algeria before finally settling in Damascus (26). It also represents the richest period of his literary and intellectual production.

During this stage, the Emir experienced what he described as the Great Spiritual Opening (*al-Fath al-'Azīm*), which occurred during his celebrated Sufi retreat. Between 1863 and 1864, he remained in Mecca and Medina for approximately one and a half years, devoting himself entirely to worship and spiritual seclusion (27).

While there, he met the distinguished Sufi master Muhammad al-Fasi, head of the Shadhili order. The Emir became his disciple and formally received initiation into the order. He devoted himself diligently to its prescribed invocations (*adhkār*) and litanies (*awrād*) until he ascended the spiritual ranks of divine knowledge and mystical realization.

This final period represents the culmination of Emir Abdelkader's spiritual and intellectual development. During it, he expressed the essence of his mystical journey through his writings, and his Sufi works became the crowning achievement of his lifelong spiritual quest (28).

### **3. The Impact of Sufism on Emir Abdelkader in the Scholarly and Humanitarian Fields**

#### **A. In the Scholarly Field: *Al-Mawāqif* (The Stations) in Sufism, Preaching, and Spiritual Guidance**

Emir Abdelkader composed *Al-Mawāqif* in Damascus. Scholars and researchers of the Emir's life unanimously regard this work as his most important composition, both in terms of its scope and the breadth of the subjects it addresses. In this monumental work, he distilled the essence of his life's experiences and clearly articulated his spiritual, mystical, and philosophical doctrine concerning the attainment of the ultimate truth he sought. He also presented his reformist ideas with remarkable precision and depth (29).

This work is distinguished from other writings of its time by its profound scientific and philosophical content. Its meanings can be fully appreciated only by readers possessing extensive knowledge of both Islamic and Greek intellectual traditions (30).

In *Al-Mawāqif*, the Emir discusses the relationship between the Creator and creation. Several passages reveal the progressive nature of his thought, including his call for the unification of the various schools of religious authority—a project that his contemporary Muhammad ibn Ali al-Sanusi had attempted but failed to realize (31).

The work consists of three volumes comprising a total of 1,416 pages and contains 372 *Mawāqif* (Stations). It was first published in 1911. Some historians maintain that the Emir chose the title *Al-Mawāqif* in emulation of earlier Sufi masters who had authored works bearing the same title, particularly Muhammad ibn Abd al-Jabbar al-Niffari. The book was written in response to requests from a number of scholars who regularly attended his gatherings and urged him to record the spiritual teachings and discourses he delivered during those sessions (32).

#### **B. In the Humanitarian Field: The Rescue of Christians in Damascus**

A sectarian conflict erupted in **Damascus** on **10 July 1860**. The unrest began after several Muslim youths publicly insulted the Christian cross. In response, Ahmad Pasha arrested them

and ordered them to sweep the streets of the city while wearing shackles on their feet. This incident served as the catalyst for widespread public unrest, prompting crowds to attack the Christian quarter, looting and destroying homes. The instigators of the violence also searched for the French and Russian consuls with the intention of killing them. The attacks took place during daylight hours.

Amid these events, Emir Abdelkader intervened decisively. At the outbreak of the civil conflict, he sent messages to several of his Druze sheikh friends, urging them to exercise moderation and compassion. He also met with religious scholars and implored them to use their influence among the population to calm tensions and prevent further bloodshed (33).

The Emir further risked his own life, as well as the lives of his family and companions, placing his reputation in jeopardy by hastening to protect more than 15,000 Christians and Jews from almost certain death in Damascus in 1860. Standing before an enraged mob determined to kill them, he boldly declared:

"Religions, and above all the Islamic faith, are far too noble and sacred to become the dagger of ignorance... I warn you against allowing ignorance to gain authority over you or to find a path into your souls." (34)

He also personally toured the city in search of people fleeing through the streets. Organizing a small convoy under the protection of Algerian guards, he succeeded in rescuing the French consuls and French residents living in Damascus (35).

The Emir's courageous actions earned him widespread admiration, gratitude, and international recognition. He received messages of congratulations and appreciation from Queen Victoria, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, Napoleon III, and leading dignitaries of the Catholic Church (36).

The Emir Abdelkader's protection of Christians during the sectarian violence is widely regarded as the first significant political contribution made by Algerians to the modern history of the Arab East, particularly the Levant (37).

#### **4. His Prose Works: Writings Composed During His Imprisonment at Amboise (1848–1852)**

The Emir's prose writings reveal the breadth of his intellectual culture and the richness of his scholarship. His works demonstrate extensive knowledge of both Islamic and Western thought. Most of his writings, however, were intended for a learned readership because they sought to revive religious thought and present a philosophical synthesis encompassing both the Islamic sciences and the Greek intellectual heritage. Emir Abdelkader authored numerous books, lengthy treatises, and diverse responses in which he addressed a wide range of subjects, letters, and intellectual issues. Among the works he composed during his imprisonment at Amboise are the following: (38)

##### ***A. Dhikrā al-'Āqil wa Tanbīh al-Ghāfil***

*(The Wise Man's Reminder and the Heedless Man's Admonition)*

This work is a treatise by Emir Abdelkader that encompasses a wide variety of interrelated subjects while being deeply imbued with the spirit of Islamic philosophy, similar to the works produced by Muslim scholars during the early centuries of Islam. The treatise relies heavily on transmitted knowledge (*naql*), containing numerous verbatim quotations from Al-Ghazali's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*) (39).

Scholars differ regarding the date of its composition. Some maintain that the Emir wrote it during his imprisonment at Amboise, whereas others attribute it to the period of his residence in Bursa between 1853 and 1855. The most likely view is that the work was begun at Amboise and completed in Bursa.

The Emir organized the book into an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion, with each chapter divided into several thematic sections. The work comprises 158 medium-sized pages and was critically edited and introduced by Dr. Mamdouh Haqqi (40).

In the first chapter, for example, the Emir discusses the concepts of knowledge and ignorance. He emphasizes that a wise person should judge statements by their intrinsic merit rather than by the identity of the speaker. He further asserts that without writing, neither religion nor worldly affairs could have been properly established or preserved (41).

### **B. *Al-Miqrāḍ al-Ḥādd li-Qaṭ' Lisān Muntaqiḍ Dīn al-Islām bi-l-Bāṭil wa-l-Ilḥād***

*(The Sharp Scissors for Cutting Off the Tongue of Those Who Falsely and Heretically Attack Islam)*

Emir Abdelkader composed this work while imprisoned in the fortress of Amboise, France, toward the end of 1852 (42). It was written as a response to those who sought to undermine the principles of Islam by attacking its doctrines and foundations (43).

The work consists of 254 medium-sized pages and is divided into a preliminary introduction and three main chapters. The introduction discusses reason and related philosophical questions (44). The first chapter is devoted to proving the existence of God, the second to establishing the truth of Prophethood, while the third examines Islamic ethics from the time of Prophet Adam onward (45).

The manuscript was copied by Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Khalidi al-Maghribi, as indicated on the title page, and was later published by Dar Maktabat al-Hayat in Beirut without a publication date.

The third chapter is generally regarded as the most significant part of the work. In it, the Emir refutes French accusations against Islam with scholarly refinement, employing Qur'anic evidence and Prophetic traditions to demonstrate that Islam commands fidelity to treaties, condemns treachery, and prohibits betrayal (46).

The book also represents the culmination of the Emir's intellectual development and the distillation of his personal experiences, particularly his experience of betrayal after the violation

of the agreements concluded to end hostilities. In 1852, he addressed this work primarily to French clergy and Christians in general. It achieved considerable success, attracting the attention of French readers, who studied and even translated it (47).

### ***C. The Memoirs of Emir Abdelkader***

The *Memoirs* constitute a collaborative work that combines the Emir's own dictation and personal narration with editorial contributions prepared under the supervision of the jurist Mustafa ibn Tahami, the Emir's brother-in-law and close companion. The work was written in Amboise in 1849 and constitutes the Emir's autobiography. As it was recorded by eyewitnesses, it possesses exceptional historical value (48).

The work consists of two distinct parts. The first presents the Emir's personal, family, and historical biography. The second provides general information concerning the history of the Prophets and Messengers, the Arabs, the Byzantines, and their moral characteristics.

The objectives behind writing these memoirs may be summarized in three principal aims:

- To affirm the truth of the Muhammadan Message and demonstrate that it encompasses all previous divine revelations, including Christianity, thereby opening new possibilities for mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians.
- To defend Arab-Islamic civilization and highlight its historical authenticity.
- To affirm the justice of his own cause by demanding the implementation of the agreement concluded with the son of the King of France, which would permit his transfer to the East.

It is noteworthy that the memoirs are characterized by a simple, sincere, and direct style of writing. They also contain numerous local expressions and reveal the Emir's early appreciation of the common ground between Islam and Christianity, reflecting his broad intellectual openness (49).

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing discussion, the following conclusions may be drawn:

Emir Abdelkader was an outstanding Algerian leader who founded a strong state and led the struggle against French colonial occupation for seventeen years, employing both material strength and spiritual conviction. He acquired the principles of Sufism through his teachers and Sufi masters and regarded Sufism as the struggle against the lower self (*jihād al-nafs*) in the cause of God. For him, the mystical experience was essentially a personal and inward journey. He believed that true Sufis are those who remain constantly present with God in every aspect of their lives and conduct.

Numerous factors contributed to the Emir's adoption of the Sufi path, including his noble lineage, his religious and Sufi upbringing, his affiliation with zawiyas and Sufi orders, and his extensive study of the writings of renowned Sufi masters.

His spiritual development progressed through successive stages. It began with a period of learning and studying Sufi literature, followed by the stage of chivalry (*futuwwa*) and frontier vigilance (*murābaṭa*), characterized by his resistance to the French occupation and his defense of the frontiers—qualities traditionally associated with eminent Sufis. This was followed by the stage of contemplation and reflection, which resulted from his imprisonment at Amboise. Finally, he reached the stage of spiritual maturity and expression, during which he attained full mystical realization.

His masterpiece, *Al-Mawāqif*, represents the culmination of his spiritual struggles and experiences along the Sufi path and contains the fullest expression of his mystical thought. Sufism also shaped his character, making him a model of tolerance, love, and rejection of fanaticism. These virtues were most clearly demonstrated by his noble humanitarian intervention during the sectarian conflict in Damascus in 1860.

The Emir's writings further attest to his mastery of Sufi thought and moral philosophy. His work *Al-Miqrād* reflects his profound engagement with the comparative study of religions, prophets, and revealed scriptures. His intellectual originality is also evident in *Dhikrā al-'Āqil wa Tanbīh al-Ghāfil*, in which he moved beyond the conventional religious and literary scholarship of his age. Finally, his *Memoirs* provide an invaluable account of his personal and family life while also presenting historical narratives concerning the Prophets and Messengers.

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