

The Spanish Colonial Project in Algeria and the Limits of Hegemony: An Examination of the Mechanisms of Social Resistance During the Sixteenth Century

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of a shifting balance of power between Muslims and Christians, Algeria witnessed an escalation of Spanish campaigns along its coasts, which benefited from the fragmentation of the Maghreb. Algerian society, however, confronted the occupation through resistance led by religious and Sufi elites and local emirs, who mobilised identity and religious discourse in response to the invasion. This study examines the role of identity and spiritual authority in strengthening resistance to the Spanish occupation, particularly through the mobilisation of the Andalusian cause and religious discourse following Algeria's incorporation into the Ottoman state, thereby helping consolidate identity in the face of cultural influence. The research adopts a historical method based on description and analysis, alongside the comparative method, while maintaining neutrality and avoiding preconceptions.

Keywords: Spanish Colonialism; Algeria; Hegemony; Social Resistance; Sixteenth Century.

Introduction

Algeria entered the modern period amid a political vacuum and economic and social fragmentation. This encouraged the Spanish to launch campaigns against its cities and ports. Local responses to the occupation ranged from submission to resistance. The components of identity and citizenship strengthened the rejection of the occupation, ultimately reshaping the balance of influence in the Mediterranean in Algeria's favour. The defining features of Algeria's Islamic identity remained inseparable from the Ottoman state, which would play an important role in supporting it against Spanish threats.

This research centres on the role of identity in strengthening resistance to the Spanish occupation of Algeria and the extent to which spiritual authority succeeded in linking this identity to religious discourse, given that Spanish incursions were driven by religious conviction and connected to the Andalusian question, which constituted the axis of religious conflict between the Islamic and Christian worlds. This research employs a historical method based on description and analysis, together with the comparative method.

1. Strategic Motives Behind the Spanish Project in Algeria

At a time when Europe was undergoing a qualitative transformation that enabled it to acquire the instruments of modernity and attain hegemonic superiority, rapidly becoming the global model, the countries of the Maghreb entered the modern period under troubled conditions (Al-Arqash, 2003, p. 9). Across the Mediterranean, the European Renaissance disseminated the modern firearms and commercial monetary economy that it had produced and developed, while also strengthening centralised political entities. In contrast to this upward trajectory, the decline and marginalisation of the traditional political entities of the Islamic Maghreb deepened, society deteriorated and retreated towards nomadism, and tribal solidarity experienced a new resurgence (Al-Arqash, 2003, p. 203).

This prompted Eurocentric writings to construct an image of a backward Other who had to be brought into the world of civilisation and progress and whose traditional structures had to be transformed. They regarded the inhabitants of this space, whom Alexis de Tocqueville called "Arabs accustomed to being ruled by foreigners", as a people who could not be dominated through governance, but only through the dispossession of their land. Such dispossession would generate hatred not between one government and another, but between one race and another (Filali, 2013, p. 110).

This was the policy that Spain and Portugal applied in the New World and sought to implement in North Africa by attempting to eradicate its religious identity after successfully eliminating it from the Iberian Peninsula. Cardinal Jiménez sought to wrest North Africa from Islamic barbarism in the service of Christianity and civilisation (Fakayir, 2015, p. 28).

The Spanish exploited the shift in the balance of power in the Mediterranean in their favour. The fragmentation of the Islamic Maghreb, the loss of its integrative factors and its descent into internal power struggles rendered its petty states politically, militarily and economically fragile. This encouraged Spain to launch campaigns against North Africa, driven by religious zeal as the immediate motive, with its strategic objectives in the region subsumed.

The fall of Granada and the neutralisation of the Muslim population of al-Andalus intensified the religious fervour that fuelled Spain's expansionist colonial project. The Spanish used the pursuit of Andalusian Muslims as a pretext for occupation and sought to prevent Andalusian refugees from returning to Spain, just as Israel does today against the Palestinians (Bouaziz, 1975, p. 24). From this period onwards, Ferdinand and Isabella began planning the occupation. The unification of the two parts of the Christian kingdom and its presentation in a religious guise distinguished it from other Renaissance kingdoms and enabled it to lead the European world. Although Isabella died in 1504, Spain did not lose its zeal, particularly because she left a testament requiring the continuation of the war against Muslims in the service of Christianity. Ferdinand's testament, issued in 1516, instructed his children to destroy the followers of the Muhammadan religion (Yahiaoui, 2004, pp. 68–70).

At the economic level, and alongside the European expansion associated with technical and geographical discoveries, conditions in the Maghreb contracted, and communities turned

inwards. A pastoral economy came to predominate as commercial activity, and the monetary economy declined. Europe's control of maritime navigation, its monopoly over trade routes and the shift in the centre of global trade from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic had profound effects on the Maghrebi countries, resulting in the marginalisation of the region and its exclusion from the global economic cycle (Al-Arqash, 2003, pp. 9–10).

Serving Christianity was not the Spaniards' sole motive. They also pursued economic and strategic objectives by occupying vital ports that could stimulate their commercial activity in the Mediterranean and secure its routes. Spain began by occupying Mers el-Kébir in 1505 and Oran in 1509 because of their considerable strategic importance. Their proximity to Spain enabled them to serve as bases for further penetration and as important supply points for the Spanish. Spanish political and military ambitions did not end at the boundaries of the coastal regions; Spanish writings regarded the Maghreb as "an inherited domain of Christian Iberia" (De Buenes Ibarra, 2001, p. 607).

Oran and Mers el-Kébir were selected as the project's starting points because they were the two ports of the Emirate of Tlemcen, which served as a principal gateway to sub-Saharan African emirates and through which vast quantities of goods passed. They were also important destinations for merchants arriving from Genoa and Venice. Occupying the North African coast would enable Spain to establish a maritime route along that coast, extending from the Spanish city of Seville to Sicily, which was rich in wheat, its principal food source (Dakani, 2001–2002, p. 20).

Secondly, as noted above, the question of the Muslims of al-Andalus played an important role in Spanish policy. Crusading hostility, together with the desire to repel the attacks launched against Spain by Muslims following the expulsion, constituted an important motive for attacking North Africa and Algeria and for accelerating the occupation to contain the conflict in Spain's favour and halt the attacks that had harmed Spanish navigation in the Mediterranean. The emergence of Turkish mariners in the Mediterranean, which would shift the balance of power in the region in favour of the Ottomans, was also a fundamental motive for hastening the occupation to consolidate Spain's presence in the Maghrebi states before confronting Ottoman power.

2. Spanish Military Campaigns and Manifestations of the Hegemonic Project

Spanish threats began to reach the Maghrebi coasts under circumstances that favoured Spain and facilitated its campaigns. Spain exploited conflict, political fragmentation, and the loss of the factors of Maghrebi integration, thereby creating conditions conducive to colonisation (Maqlati, 2018, p. 110). Algeria was thus vulnerable to invasion and occupation following the intensification of competition and conflict over authority within the Zayyanid state. This conflict extended beyond disputes over authority within the state to fragmentation and alliances with the Spanish, who fought one another to preserve the influence and power that remained to them, thereby serving the colonial project.

This was embodied in the conflict between the brothers Abu Hammu III Boughlamun and Abu Zayyan III al-Mas'ud, whom the former defeated with the support of the Spanish king Charles V (Belaârbi, 2018, p. 16). The Spanish successfully exploited this conflict and maintained a client authority capable of preparing the conditions for occupation. Mers el-Kébir was occupied in 1505 by Diego Márquez de Gómez, who established the first government (Fey, 1858, p. 76). A campaign was then directed towards Oran under Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros, and the city was occupied in 1509 (Cámara et al., 2010, p. 86). Pedro Navarro subsequently occupied Béjaïa in 1510 (Documents, 1875, pp. 11–13). The island opposite Algiers was then seized, followed by Mostaganem in 1511 and Dellys, Annaba and Honaine in 1531. Meanwhile, Tlemcen descended into internal conflicts that served no purpose other than to give the Spanish an opportunity to occupy it (Bouaziz, 1975, p. 25).

It should be noted that, following the appeal for assistance from the Barbarossa brothers, the Spanish campaigns against Algiers failed in 1516 and 1518. The Spanish were also expelled from the Peñón fortress in 1529, and Algerian cities and ports were gradually liberated owing to the Algerian navy's role. Oran remained the only city that could not be liberated until the era of the days.

3. Algerian Society Between Policies of Subjugation and Forms of Resistance

Algeria during this period was marked by a considerable political vacuum amid the weakness of the Zayyanid state, its preoccupation with internal conflicts and its inability to defend Algeria against external threats. This fostered alliances with the Spanish and reinforced a mentality of submission in the absence of the capacity to confront them. Nevertheless, despite limited military resources, numerous centres of influence within society assumed responsibility for and organised the defence of Algeria. Attitudes towards the Spanish occupation therefore ranged from submission to resistance.

As the Spanish succeeded in occupying numerous strategic ports and coastal cities, the Zayyanid state became weaker and separatist movements expanded by exploiting the political disorder that had come to characterise Algeria. Yahya al-Thabiti established his independence in Ténès in 1506 (Belaârbi, 2018, pp. 16–17). Rather than adopting a firm position against the Spanish and confronting them during this difficult period, internal conflicts intensified, encouraging the Spanish to continue occupying further vital cities. Annaba was occupied during this period, and a peace treaty subsequently reinforced Spain's submission concluded between Algiers and Spain in 1510, negotiated by a delegation led by Salim al-Tumi al-Tha'alibi (Al-Jilali, 1965, p. 201). He ruled the city independently, relying on the solidarity of his tribe and an alliance with the commercial aristocracy based in the city (Al-Arqash, 2003, p. 37).

In addition, the Spanish imposed a treaty on Mostaganem, while Cherchell and Dellys sent delegations requesting submission to and dependence on Spain despite the harsh conditions imposed upon them. These included the payment of an annual tribute, the release of Christian prisoners, the surrender of castles and fortresses to the Spanish and guarantees that the Spanish garrisons would be provisioned (Dakani, 2001–2002, p. 30).

Numerous Arab tribes in Oran, including the Banu Amir, Suwayd and Ikrima, likewise declared their submission to the Spanish. Spain came to rely on them for various kinds of information (Derradj, 2015, p. 157) and provisions, and they even attacked one another in Spain's interest. The occupying power was thereby able to create a network of collaborators (Chouqi, 2017, p. 125), whom the Spanish called the "Moors inclined towards peace" (*Los moros inclinados a la paz*), together with auxiliaries known as the "committed Arabs" (*Mogataces*) and informants and guides (*Los adalides*). The Spanish thus divided the Arabs into tribes that cooperated with them, to which they applied the term "Moors of peace", and tribes that opposed them, which they designated "traitors" (*Los traidores*) (Ben Ashenhou, 1972, p. 51).

The efforts of the Spanish consequently converged with those of the tribes that had submitted to them and with local forces in opposing manifestations of resistance, eliminating Algerian authority and preserving the gains they had achieved, namely control over numerous important cities and ports (Fakayir, 2015, p. 138). They then sought to expand their influence further by exploiting the prevailing divisions.

The services that client forces provided to the Spanish were intended to secure material privileges amid their inability to resist and their fear that their influence would diminish if they declared their resistance. Their position was therefore voluntary, reflecting the submissive disposition adopted by these forces; they were not coerced (Derradj, 2015, p. 158). On the one hand, they sought privileges and influence. On the other hand, despite the limited capabilities of other tribes, the latter refused to submit to the Spanish and declared their opposition as a national position rejecting the violation of the homeland. There was therefore no justification for the collaborationist position of the tribes that submitted to Spain.

Cooperation and alliance with the Spanish continued even after the Algerians appealed for assistance from the brothers Oruç and Khayr al-Din. Rather than strengthening Algeria's internal front and cooperating with the Turks against the Spanish, the remnants of Zayyanid authority allied themselves with Spain against the Turks. Muhammad VII did so, prompting the inhabitants to revolt against him after he sided with the Spanish. Spain exploited the opportunity to support him in pursuit of its interests after he fled to Oran and requested Spanish assistance. A campaign was ultimately sent from Oran to Tlemcen in his support. Tlemcen was occupied, and a treaty was imposed upon him that required the payment of an annual tribute to Spain and assistance in occupying Algerian ports and expanding Spanish power under the pretext of confronting the Turks (Bouaziz, 1975, p. 26).

The conflict over Tlemcen continued among the Zayyanid princes allied with Spain against the Turks, even after Ottoman authority had been consolidated in Algeria and Algeria had joined the Ottoman state. The present study cannot elaborate on the historical events that characterised this period, as the conflict did not end until Salih Reis finally eliminated the remnants of Zayyanid authority in 1554.

The preceding events reflect the deterioration of political conditions and the persistence of a mentality of submission to the foreign occupier, despite the existence of a Muslim power

capable of confronting crusading threats in the Mediterranean. This power established a strong political and military presence, transforming Algeria from a modest mercantile phase into an emerging military institution supported by Istanbul. The death of Oruç may be regarded as one manifestation of alliance with a foreign power against national interests.

Although numerous local forces declared their allegiance to Spain, manifestations of resistance emerged. Some local forces successfully organised this resistance and mobilised the population to embrace it. These efforts helped confine Spanish influence to certain regions and obstructed Spain's expansionist project. The Spanish consequently failed to penetrate the interior despite their military superiority and the limited resources available to the resistance.

In this context, political and religious leaders emerged as centres of influence within society. Their symbolic capital and the success of their religious and national discourses helped attract and mobilise the population for resistance. Numerous anti-Spanish fronts were formed under the leadership of local emirs and shaykhs of Sufi orders (Derradj, 2015, p. 154), as well as marabouts (Boumoula, 2013, p. 73). In Constantine, Abu Bakr, the city's emir, led the resistance (Mercier, 1903, p. 182). In Kabylia, Ibn al-Qadi led the resistance from Mount Kuku (Genevois, 1974, pp. 6–7), while the al-Muqrani family operated from the Kalâa of Beni Abbès and later from Medjana (Boumoula, 2015–2016, p. 2). The Zwawa tribes pledged allegiance to the Emir of Constantine and rejected the treaty of submission to Spain signed by the Emir of Béjaïa (Derradj, 2015, p. 156).

The role of local families in embracing resistance should also be noted. Many of these families formed a warrior aristocracy as a result of the influence they had acquired in earlier historical periods, enabling them to share power with the ruling forces. Constantine came under the authority of ruling families and gradually moved beyond the control of the central authority in Tunis (Maachi, 2015, p. 107).

Cultural and religious elites and local leaders thus played an important role, serving as fundamental actors in organising society, guiding this pivotal period of history, and activating society's role in strengthening the values of identity and citizenship to achieve the national unity required to confront Spain amid manifestations of dependence and submission. The uprisings of inhabitants in numerous Algerian cities against rulers who collaborated with Spain demonstrate their rejection of submission and their adoption of resistance.

4. Mechanisms of Social Resistance and the Limits of Spanish Hegemony

Although economic and strategic motives drove the Spanish colonial project, it also reflected a conflict between two identities, extending the long historical conflict between East and West. Had geopolitical conditions in the region not shifted in favour of the Maghrebi states with the emergence of Ottoman power, Spain would have sought to eradicate Maghrebi identity in both its Arab and Islamic dimensions once it had achieved its economic objectives. It may therefore be argued that Spain failed to implement the policy of cultural containment that it had successfully applied to the Muslims of al-Andalus and the policy of ethnic cleansing that it had implemented in the New World. Spain lacked sufficient time to penetrate Maghrebi societies and

dismantle their cultural structures amid the rapidly unfolding events that culminated in Algeria's association with the Ottoman state through the efforts of Oruç and Khayr al-Din.

The Spanish occupation did not differ from its French counterpart in its condescending view of other peoples or in its violent logic, which rested on the systematic destruction and eradication of the deep structures underpinning the Algerian character. Its objective was articulated through an ethnocentric tendency supported by ideas concerning the dissemination of civilisation (Filali, 2013, p. 108). This was evident immediately after the Spanish occupied the coastal cities, when they began destroying mosques, converting some into churches and holding prayers. Although Spain did not directly undermine Algeria's cultural identity to the same extent as France, its project was not fundamentally different from the French one.

As noted above, Spanish writings produced during the inhumane events inflicted upon the Muslims of al-Andalus regarded North Africa as an inherited domain of Christian Iberia. These writings bore an ideological imprint that incited the eradication of Muslims inside and outside Spain. This indicates a Spanish desire to eradicate Islamic identity as an extension of the actions undertaken within Spain, which targeted the Islamic culture and civilisation that had endured for a long period and formed an integral part of the history of the Iberian Peninsula.

The Spanish project in Algeria consequently encountered the emergence of Turkish mariners, whose maritime activity took on jihadi dimensions and whose positive image was imprinted on the collective imagination. They were a generation of mariners produced by the circumstances of their time (Al-Arqash, 2003, p. 38). They succeeded in linking Algeria to the Ottoman state by employing religious discourses within the framework of shared membership in the Islamic bond, particularly after the Ottoman state transformed itself from a state into a caliphate following its entry into Egypt and its receipt of the keys to the Kaaba.

Alongside its support for Algeria against Spanish threats, the Andalusian question occupied an important place in Ottoman foreign policy within the framework of a shared history, destiny and religion. The Regency of Algiers became an important source of support for this cause through maritime rescue operations conducted by the regency's mariners on behalf of the Muslims of al-Andalus and through raids on the Spanish coasts.

Within Algeria, the components of citizenship and identity played an important role in resisting the Spanish occupation through the work of religious institutions. The religious aristocracy, represented by the marabouts and sharifs, occupied an important position in Algerian society and left a profound impact on its social structures. The material and cultural topography of the Islamic Maghreb was marked by the influence these groups exercised over collective memory and everyday discourse (Filali, 2013, p. 91).

The religious and cultural institutions of this period, including mosques, zawiyas and ribats, were strongholds of popular Islam and supported numerous ruling dynasties (Aït Ahmed, 2002, p. 81). They played a role in popular mobilisation for jihad by attracting the masses and amplifying their voices within popular circles, drawing on their success in mobilising citizenship and identity.

In the Maghreb, zawiyas extended beyond their religious function to assume social and political roles, creating solidarities among tribal and rural communities. As Mohamed Arkoun argues, shaykhs of tribes and Sufi orders had been able to organise and regulate the inhabitants of remote areas since the thirteenth century (Filali, 2013, p. 95). Religious institutions accordingly succeeded in organising resistance to the Spanish and employing religious slogans for this purpose, particularly in the absence of a formal authority capable of undertaking Algeria's defence.

Cultural elites, represented by scholars and religious figures, also successfully mobilised the components of identity to resist the Spanish occupation through their guiding and advisory roles. The poet Shaykh Muhammad al-Tuwati warned the inhabitants of Oran in a lengthy poem following the fall of Granada and the Spanish occupation of several coastal cities. Abd al-Rahman al-Tha'alibi likewise sent a letter to one of his students in the vicinity of Béjaïa, Abu Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Ahmad, urging him to persuade the common people of the necessity of preparing for jihad. He also addressed letters to jurists (Fakayir, 2018, p. 27). Numerous scholars issued fatwas concerning the obligation of jihad and others prohibiting cooperation with the occupying power, thereby making religious identity a pillar of resistance.

Scholars and religious figures may be regarded as among the foremost advocates of jihad against the Spanish because of their strong symbolic presence in society and their ability to administer zawiyas and Sufi orders, through which they recruited large numbers of students for the resistance. When Bey Muhammad al-Kabir resolved to liberate Oran, he turned to the scholars to exhort the people to wage jihad. The zawiya of Ibn al-Sharif al-Mazuni played a major role in mobilising the students who participated in the first and second liberations of Oran (Bouchenafi, 2011, p. 88).

During this historical period, Sufism represented a growing religious and esoteric current whose central principle was jihad. Sufis also embodied the will of the popular classes against the excesses of rulers and provided refuge from Christian Spanish threats. They frequently accused scholars of opportunism and accommodation with rulers, which prevented the gathering of the people and their mobilisation for jihad (Sahraoui, 2016, p. 75). The social standing of the marabout shaykh is evident here not only in its religious dimension, but also in the sovereignty and authority that demanded obedience (Filali, 2013, p. 100). They were therefore able to bring together the most influential groups in difficult times because they possessed a spiritually grounded charisma built upon the cohesion and loyalty of those around them and associated with protection (Filali, 2013, p. 104).

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, Algerian identity contributed to strengthening resistance to Spain at numerous junctures. Centres of influence within society played an important role in mobilising its various groups and successfully employed religious discourses to organise resistance and jihad. These roles confronted Spanish superiority and the activities of collaborators, yet they

succeeded in leading Algerian society amid the near-total absence of state authority capable of unifying Algeria under a single banner against foreign invasion.

The efforts of the Barbarossa brothers and Algeria's association with the Ottoman state also contributed to the liberation of coastal cities and their ports. The Spanish presence became confined to Oran before the city was finally liberated. The components of identity shared by Algeria and the Ottoman state contributed to the defence of Algeria and to support for the Andalusian cause, and they eliminated Spanish ambitions that sought to destroy the cultural structure of Algerian society and to implement a policy of cultural containment. Despite some of its negative features, the Ottoman presence was consequently reflected in the collective imagination as a symbol of protection.

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