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Algerian-Spanish Relations in the Late Ottoman Period through Algerian Local Sources: The Memoirs of Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar as a Case Study

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Abstract:

This article aims to highlight the importance of the Memoirs of Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar and their contribution to writing and documenting the history of Algerian-Spanish relations in the late Ottoman period. As one of the most prominent local historical testimonies, the memoirs recorded major transformations in Algerian-Spanish relations in their political, military, and diplomatic dimensions. They therefore contribute to presenting a more balanced and objective account, distinct from the foreign perspectives that were contemporary with these events in the region.

Keywords: local historical sources, memoirs, Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar, Algerian-Spanish relations, late Ottoman period, Regency of Algiers.

Introduction:

Algerian-Spanish relations during the Ottoman period received considerable attention in historical studies by historians and researchers because they involved political, military, diplomatic, economic, and religious interactions. Algeria's strategic location in the region created a situation of continuous confrontation with Spain, which sought, after the fall of al-Andalus, to expand its influence along the Maghreb coast. Algeria, under Ottoman sovereignty, worked to resist these ambitions and defend its maritime and territorial domains. As a result, relations were marked at times by rivalry and conflict and, at other times, by negotiation, treaty-making, prisoner exchanges, and commercial interests.

Among the most prominent Algerian local sources that addressed Algerian-Ottoman relations in the late Ottoman period and sought to explain the nature of the relationship between the two states are the Memoirs of Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar, Naqib al-Ashraf of Algiers.

1 - Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar: Biographical Overview

1-1 - His Name and Lineage

He was Hajj Ahmad ibn Hajj Ali al-Naqib(1). Al-Hafnawi traces his family lineage through his grandfather as follows: Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Abd Allah ibn Mas'ud ibn Isa ibn Ahmad ibn Abd al-Wahid ibn Abd Allah ibn Abd al-Karim ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Abd al-Salam ibn Mashish ibn Abi Bakr ibn Ali ibn Rizq ibn Isa ibn Salim ibn Marwan ibn Haydara ibn Ali ibn Muhammad ibn Abd Allah ibn Dawud ibn Idris ibn Idris ibn Abd Allah al-Kamil ibn al-Hasan al-Muthanna ibn al-Hasan al-Sibt ibn Ali and Fatima, daughter of the Prophet, peace be upon him(2). This genealogy indicates that he belonged to the Idrisid family, in which the office of Naqib al-Ashraf of Algiers was inherited from father to son(3).

1-2 - Birth and Upbringing

He was born in Algiers during the rule of Dey Uthman Pasha in 1196 AH/1781 CE. He grew up in a well-established family whose presence in Algiers dated back to the tenth century AH(4). Several Ottoman rulers therefore sought to

strengthen their ties with the family. One of them was Dey Muhammad Bektash Pasha, who sought their favor by building a zawiya for them in 1709. The zawiya was located on al-Jnina Street and Barbarossa Lane in Algiers(5).

He began his education in Algiers, where he acquired substantial knowledge of religious and linguistic sciences from leading scholars of the city, especially in the family zawiya, which remained standing until its property was confiscated by the French occupation authorities(6). When he reached adulthood, he worked in the administration of the Regency in Algiers(7). He then succeeded his father as Naqib al-Ashraf(*) and began working as a scribe in the Diwan of the Regency(8). He held this post twice: first before the French occupation and again after his return from Morocco in 1847(9). This office was the highest social rank after the governor and the mufti. Its holders enjoyed considerable social, religious, and political standing within the Regency and were highly respected by different groups in society(10). During the Ottoman period, the Naqib al-Ashraf was appointed by the local governor, particularly in the western provinces(11).

Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar also served as a scribe in the Diwan of the Regency during the late Ottoman period(12). After his return from Tunisia, he held a similar position under Hajj Ahmad Bey* and later under Emir Abd al-Qadir*. He also worked in commerce in 1847(13).

Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar had two sons. The first, Ali, was captured by the French at about thirteen years of age and was used by the French administration as a means of pressure on his father. The second, Qaddur, migrated with his father to Morocco. After returning to Algeria, Qaddur held religious and judicial posts and later became Naqib al-Ashraf after his father's death(14).

1-3 - Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar and the French Occupation

In his memoirs, al-Zahhar stated that he was fifty years old in the summer of 1830, during the French occupation of Algeria. He also reported that he nearly fell as a martyr at Burj al-Hasan, the Citadel of Algiers, after the artillery bombardment of the city(15). France then applied a policy of forced displacement against Algerians. Influential members of Algerian society, especially political and religious figures, were accused of conspiring against France and of maintaining links with the Turks, whether through the resistance of Hajj Ahmad Bey in the east or by joining the resistance of Emir Abd al-Qadir in the west, among similar accusations(16). These circumstances drove many Algerians to neighboring Arab countries such as Tunisia and Morocco, particularly Algerian notables, wealthy people, and scholars(17).

1-3-1 - His Migration to Tunisia

Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar was among the notables and scholars displaced by the French occupation in 1832. He went to Tunisia and settled in the city of Tunis. There he deepened his knowledge of religious scholarship and jurisprudence. He spent several years studying with scholars, especially those of the Zaytuna Mosque(18).

1-3-2 - His Return to Algeria

The available sources do not state when Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar returned to Algeria. After his return, however, he went to Constantine to join the resistance of the city's inhabitants under their leader, Hajj Ahmad Bey. He served as a scribe until Constantine fell to the French occupation in 1837. He then joined Emir Abd al-Qadir's resistance in western Algeria, where the Emir employed him as his private secretary. He accompanied him in both prosperity and adversity. After the Battle of the Smala on 15 May 1843 and the defeat of Emir Abd al-Qadir, al-Zahhar migrated to Morocco(19).

1-3-3 - His Migration to Morocco

After Emir Abd al-Qadir's defeat at the Battle of the Smala in 1843, Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar migrated to Morocco with many Algerians living in western Algeria. This was due to its geographical proximity and to the support of its sultan, Abd al-Rahman ibn Hisham, for Emir Abd al-Qadir in his resistance. They headed to Moroccan Sharifian cities such as Tetouan and Fez(20).

Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar stayed in Fez with his son Qaddur for three years. They benefited from the Moroccan royal grant provided to emigrant Algerian jurists and notables, including the use of habous houses and increases in their stipends because of their affiliation with scholarly and juridical families(21). At the end of this period, al-Zahhar returned to Algiers, resumed the office of Naqib al-Ashraf, and engaged in trade in a shop that he had rented(22).

1-4 - His Scholarly Life and Works

As a young man, Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar studied with scholars of Algiers and learned jurisprudence, language, and other fields of knowledge(23). After the French occupation of Algiers in the summer of 1830, he migrated to Tunisia following France's forced displacement of scholars and notables in 1832 under the Duke of Rovigo. His stay in Tunisia broadened his intellectual formation. He regularly attended study circles at the Zaytuna Mosque and learned from its scholars(24). His studies included commentaries on Sahih al-Bukhari, jurisprudence, and grammar. Among his teachers was Ibrahim al-Riyahi* (1768-1850)(25), who was known for teaching al-Qastallani's commentary on al-Bukhari, the Mukhtasar of Khalil in jurisprudence, and Arabic grammar(26). He also studied with Hajj al-Tayyib ibn Isa al-Jaza'iri and other Zaytuna scholars(27).

During his migration to Morocco, al-Zahhar spent three years in Fez and Tetouan with his son Qaddur. He continued to expand his knowledge and also taught students(28).

One of the most important works left by Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar is his Memoirs. They consisted of private notebooks and booklets, some of which had originally been used to record family accounts(29).

1-5 - The Memoirs of Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar

Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar's book, entitled Memoirs of Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar, Naqib al-Ashraf of Algiers, is one of the most important local sources for Algerian history in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The historian and scholar Ahmad Tawfiq al-Madani edited the work after receiving its manuscript from Shaykh Mahmud al-Sharif al-Zahhar, the last Naqib al-Ashraf of Algiers and a grandson of Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar. Al-Madani promised to publish it at an appropriate time after persuading him not to hand the memoirs to the Director of Indigenous Affairs in Algeria, Misumirant(30).

These memoirs consist of a draft, private notebooks, and booklets, some of which had been used to record family accounts(31). When Shaykh Ahmad Tawfiq al-Madani edited them, he found evidence of this earlier use, noting that "most of its pages contain many marginal notes, and it also uses simple Arabic language"(32).

This manuscript is one of the most important local sources on Algeria during the late Ottoman period. It records the biographies and actions of the deys who ruled from 1754 onward and covers the period before and after the French occupation that began in the summer of 1830(33). It also discusses the Regency of Algiers' relations with the wider world, especially the Ottoman Empire and neighboring Arab countries, as well as European states and the United States of America.

The original notebook measures 34 cm in length and 23 cm in width. Its final section measures 28.5 cm by 19 cm.

The edition prepared by Ahmad Tawfiq al-Madani contains 200 pages. It is not divided into chapters or sections, but is arranged chronologically according to the reigns of the deys. Its second edition was published by the National Publishing and Distribution Company in Algiers in 1980 under publication number 877/80(34).

1-6 - His Death

Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar was one of the most important Algerian historians who witnessed the final phase of the Ottoman period and the French occupation of Algeria. Ahmad Tawfiq al-Madani states that he died in 1872 at nearly ninety (90) years of age(35). He was buried in his grandfather's zawiya.

2 - Algeria's Relations with Spain in the Memoirs of Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar

The Algerian-Spanish conflict in the western Mediterranean during the modern period was among the fiercest conflicts between the Regency of Algiers and European states throughout the Ottoman period. The display of naval military force remained a prominent feature of Algerian-Spanish relations into the late eighteenth century. Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar reported that Dey Uthman Pasha regularly sent his fleet to raid the coasts of Spain and return with spoils. Although Spain sought by every means to conclude a peace treaty with Algiers, it failed to do so. This led it to launch several military expeditions(36), including the following:

The Count O'Reilly Expedition of 1775

King Charles III of Spain* ordered the preparation and dispatch of this expedition in response to the firm position of Dey Muhammad ibn Uthman Pasha*. The force consisted of fifty-one warships and 344 transport vessels carrying more than 24,000 soldiers(37). It also included 900 cannons and more than 2,000 sailors(38). In his memoirs, Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar wrote that "the Spaniards came with a fleet of five hundred vessels..."(39).

The expedition left the port of Cartagena for Algiers on 3 June 1775 and reached the eastern side of the city on 30 June 1775(40). Fighting began soon afterward and continued for eleven days. The expedition failed, forcing the Spanish forces to withdraw on 12 July 1775(41).

Algerian vessels engaged in maritime jihad pursued the retreating forces, seized spoils, and brought back prisoners. Among the captured spoils were sixteen cannons, two ships, 4,000 shells, large quantities of ammunition, rifles, timber, and several damaged vessels(42).

The First Don Antonio Barcelo Expedition against Algiers, 1197 AH/1783 CE

After Spain's defeat in the 1775 expedition led by Count O'Reilly, the Spanish court sought to erase the effects of that setback. It organized a second expedition against the Regency of Algiers under Don Antonio Barcelo. The expedition departed from Cartagena, Spain, on 3 July 1783(43).

The expedition reached the coast of Algiers on 29 July 1783 and consisted of seventy-six warships. The following day, the ships began bombarding the city. The bombardment lasted for a full week, during which the Spanish fleet fired approximately 7,500 projectiles(44).

In response, Dey Muhammad ibn Uthman Pasha contacted his captain, Hajj Muhammad, and asked him to devise a military strategy against the lanjor vessels*, which had caused destruction to the urban fabric of Algiers(45). The plan consisted of placing cannons on large boats carrying lime intended for construction. This plan ended in a severe Spanish defeat, and the attackers decided to withdraw without achieving their aim of subduing the city(46).

The Second Don Antonio Barcelo Expedition against Algiers, 1198 AH/1784 CE

Despite the failure of the Spanish expeditions of 1775 and 1783, Spain decided to launch another campaign in 1784. It formed a European alliance with the Kingdom of Naples, Malta, and Portugal(47).

The crusading expedition against Algiers, launched with the Pope's blessing, departed from the port of Cartagena in Spain on 9 July 1784. It consisted of 130 warships, including ten transport ships, and was commanded by Don Antonio Barcelo(48).

Dey Muhammad ibn Uthman Pasha learned of the approaching expedition through a letter sent by the Moroccan ruler Muhammad ibn Abd Allah*. He prepared carefully and ordered the repair of damage caused during the previous attack(49). His forces adopted primarily defensive measures that kept much of the bombardment at a greater distance from the city. At sea, the Algerian navy confronted the European alliance using gunboats similar to the Spanish lanjors. These vessels were commanded by Captain Hajj Muhammad(50).

Fighting began between the two sides, and several European vessels were hit. The allied fleet was forced to withdraw after suffering casualties and the capture of a number of European soldiers. The Spanish expedition thus ended in a serious defeat, largely because of the organized preparations made by the Algerian forces(51).

Peace between the Regency of Algiers and Spain, 1785

After the failure of successive Spanish military expeditions against the Regency of Algiers, Spain sought a political and peaceful solution. The Christian powers had also failed to eliminate Algerian naval power in the western Mediterranean. Spain therefore pursued a peace treaty with the rulers of Algiers. Dey Muhammad ibn Uthman Pasha initially rejected all negotiations with the Spanish(52). When Hasan Pasha, the Wakil al-Haraj, suggested such an agreement after returning from Istanbul, the Dey replied: "I will not make peace with them as long as I live"(53).

However, several disasters affected the Regency of Algiers, including floods, advancing swarms of locusts, and epidemics such as plague. These had a negative effect on economic conditions and caused famine after agricultural crops were destroyed(54). Operations of maritime jihad carried out by the Taifa of the Ra'is also declined, although they constituted an important source of financing for the Regency's treasury(55). The Spanish delegation also continued to insist on concluding a peace treaty with the Regency of Algiers. All these factors led Dey Muhammad ibn Uthman Pasha to reverse his position and agree to a truce and peace with the Spanish(56).

Negotiations began after an official Spanish delegation arrived in Algiers in June 1785. It was headed by the senior envoys Count d'Expilly and Admiral Mazarredo(57). At the Dey's request, the French consul received the delegation on its arrival(58).

The Dey received the envoys in his palace for a meeting that lasted about fifteen minutes. The Spanish regarded this audience as a diplomatic success and a positive indication that an agreement might be reached(59). Dey Muhammad Pasha then met with senior officials of the Regency, including the Khaznaji, the Agha, the Khuja al-Khayl, the Wakil al-Haraj, and the senior khujas. They approved the conclusion of a peace treaty with Spain(60).

Negotiations continued for almost a full year and ended with the signing of the treaty on 14 June 1786(61). The Algerian side was represented by Dey Muhammad ibn Uthman Pasha, while the Spanish side was represented by Prime Minister Count of Floridablanca. The treaty was prepared in three copies. The Spanish-language copy was retained by the Spanish king, the Turkish-language copy by Dey Muhammad ibn Uthman Pasha, and the third copy by the Spanish consul resident in Algiers(62). Cannon fire from the fortifications and ships followed the agreement and publicly marked the conclusion of peace(63).

The Liberation of Oran, 1206 AH/1792 CE

Successive rulers and deys of Algiers had attempted to recover Oran and Mers el-Kebir from Spain, but these attempts failed. After Dey Muhammad ibn Uthman Pasha came to power, he ordered Muhammad al-Kabir, Bey of the Western Beylik, to launch a campaign in 1790 to liberate Oran(64).

In October 1790, Algerian forces began attacking Spanish fortifications in Oran. They also used ambush tactics and imposed both a naval and a land blockade on the city. These operations continued into 1791(65).

During this decisive phase in the struggle for Oran, Dey Muhammad ibn Uthman Pasha died. He was succeeded by Dey Hasan Pasha*, who ordered Bey Muhammad al-Kabir to continue the siege(66). A war of attrition continued throughout the spring and summer of 1791. It included several intense engagements, among them the battle of 5 July 1791(67).

Under these circumstances, Spain sought a peaceful settlement to the Oran question and resumed negotiations in an effort to stop military operations(68). After lengthy exchanges, the two sides concluded a peace treaty on 9 December 1791. It was signed by Dey Hasan Pasha and Don Miguel de Olaria, a representative of the Spanish royal consulate in Algiers. In its first two articles, Spain agreed to withdraw permanently from Oran and Mers el-Kebir(69).

Spanish forces finally withdrew from Oran and Mers el-Kebir, leaving behind the weapons and equipment agreed upon in the treaty. The keys of the city were handed to Bey Muhammad ibn Mustafa al-Kabir, and the Spanish governor of Oran, Don Juan Courten, left the city on 24 February 1792(70). In the same year, Dey Hasan Pasha sent Sultan Selim III* the news of the conquest of Oran and its recovery from Spanish control, together with the city's keys. The Sultan regarded it as a great conquest for the Muslims(71).

Conclusion:

At the end of this research paper, we reached a set of findings and observations that may be summarized as follows:

- Memoirs are among the most important Algerian local sources documenting a period of Algerian history, namely the Ottoman period. Their importance lies in the fact that they provide the perspective of an eyewitness who lived through pivotal events in the history of our nation, especially the late Ottoman period and the beginning of the French occupation of the region.
- Among the most important memoirs covering the late Ottoman period and the beginning of the French occupation of Algeria are those of Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar. They make a significant contribution to documenting Algerian-Spanish relations in the late Ottoman period.
- The importance of Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar's memoirs lies in highlighting the different dimensions of Algerian-Spanish relations in the late Ottoman period. This has helped us understand the nature of political, military, and diplomatic interactions in the western Mediterranean within the context of rivalry and the extension of influence in the region.
- It is therefore clear that the Memoirs of Hajj Ahmad al-Sharif al-Zahhar are not merely a personal narrative. They are a documentary reference and a fundamental resource for researchers studying the history of Ottoman Algeria. They are also a rich source that opens new avenues for studies of international relations and diplomacy in the western Mediterranean during the modern and contemporary periods.

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