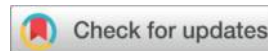




Outlaws under French Law in the Aurès Region in the Late Nineteenth Century

Mohamed Amzian as a Case Study



Prof. Dr. Boughedada Elamir

Mohamed Khider University of Biskra, Algeria

boughedada.elamir@univ-biskra.dz

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Abstract

This study aims to open the way for readers and researchers to delve into the history of the Algerian people's struggle against the French occupier. It also seeks to correct the belief held by some researchers that the only outlaws under French law were the sixteen individuals who rebelled against the French occupier in the 1940s and were given this designation. The study also seeks to identify and compare the concepts and values associated with those who defied French law, determine their role in shaping revolutionary consciousness among Algerians, and highlight the role of nineteenth-century outlaws under French law in laying the foundations for this consciousness.

After examining the subject, the study concludes that defiance of French law was not a phenomenon limited to those who rebelled against the French occupier at the beginning of the 1940s. Others had preceded them by many decades, going back to the early years of the occupation in the nineteenth century. One of these, though not the most prominent, was Mohamed Amzian in the Aurès. He disregarded French law and refused to comply with it. Although Mohamed Amzian failed to achieve the freedom he sought for Algerians, or at least for the inhabitants of the Aurès, through his defiance of French law and his declaration of revolt against the French authorities, he helped lay the foundations of revolutionary consciousness among Algerians. His defiance of French law in the Aurès in the late nineteenth century paved the way for others in the region to follow his example and rebel against that law. A notable example was Messaoud Ben Zemat, whom France declared an outlaw in the 1940s. He belonged to the Beni Bouslimane tribe, to which Mohamed Amzian also belonged. The study further concludes that those who defied French law were neither criminals nor highwaymen, as the French colonial authorities portrayed them. Rather, they were free and honourable men, imbued with moral and human values, who rejected the policies of oppression and subjugation imposed on them and on their fellow Algerians by the French occupier in the name of enforcing the law and placing the law above all else.

Keywords: Law; Revolutionary Consciousness; Colonial Occupation; Nineteenth Century; Moral Values

Introduction

Some researchers may believe that the phenomenon of defying French law in Algeria during the occupation was confined to the sixteen heroes who rebelled in the 1940s against the authority of the French occupier and against its laws, which were unjust to the Algerian people. They rejected all attempts by the occupier to reconcile with them and pardon them in order to bring them back under its authority and subject them to a law they had already defied. This came after severe sentences, including death sentences, had been issued against them and after they had been described in various terms as criminal outlaws.

However, an indisputable historical fact is that the criminal policy pursued by the French occupier against the Algerian people from the time it set foot in Algeria in 1830 led to the emergence of many rebels. They rejected the oppressive policies directed against them and their fellow Algerians and refused to comply with French law, which placed them among those considered outside it. One such figure was Mohamed Amzian, or Sheikh Boubrema, as the French authorities called him. He is an important case for the study of outlaws under French law in Algeria in general and in the Aurès in particular in the late nineteenth century. He rebelled against French law, confronted those who imposed it, and declared an uprising against them. This uprising revealed the reasons for his defiance of French law and also exposed the crimes committed by the occupier against the Algerian people. This raises the following question:

To what extent did Mohamed Amzian succeed in achieving his revolutionary objectives after defying French law and declaring an uprising against the occupier?

Significance of the Study

- The study brings attention to a nineteenth-century Algerian revolutionary figure whose actions reflected a strong patriotic spirit. He was among the early national figures to reject French law openly and declare his defiance of it.
- It clearly highlights Mohamed Amzian's role and method in consolidating the foundations of revolutionary action and defiance of French law.
- It highlights the kinship and geographical links between Mohamed Amzian and those who were later described as outlaws under French law in the Aurès during the first half of the twentieth century.
- It enables readers and researchers to trace lines of revolutionary continuity between those labelled outlaws in the 1940s and earlier resisters of the nineteenth century, even though the French authorities did not explicitly use the same label for the earlier figures.
- It explains the reasons and motives that led these national revolutionary figures to reject French law and refuse to comply with it.
- It identifies the reasons that led the French colonial authorities to classify some Algerian rebels and resisters as outlaws.
- It exposes the falsity of the French colonial narrative concerning those whom it described as outlaws.
- It highlights Algerian attitudes toward French law during the colonial period.
- It examines the methods used by the French colonial authorities in dealing with Algerians whom they classified as outlaws.
- It helps the reader understand how French colonial rule placed Algerian rebels and resisters within the category of outlaws.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To encourage readers and researchers to examine more closely the history of the Algerian people's struggle against French colonial rule.
- To correct the view held by some researchers that the only outlaws under French law were the sixteen insurgents who rose against the French authorities in the 1940s.
- To support the argument that resistance to French law emerged in the nineteenth century rather than the twentieth century, using historical evidence drawn from the period.
- To identify and compare the concepts and values associated with those who rejected French law. The study also examines their role in forming revolutionary consciousness among Algerians and the contribution made by nineteenth-century resisters to this process.

Method

The study follows the historical method, which describes and traces events by relying on specialized sources and references in this field.

To answer the research question and achieve the study's objectives, the discussion is organized around the following elements:

1. Definition of outlaws under French law.
2. Mohamed Amzian: biographical background.
3. Reasons for Mohamed Amzian's rejection of French law and his proclamation of an uprising.
4. The temporal and geographical scope of the uprising.
5. The outbreak of the uprising and its stages.
6. Results of the uprising.
7. Outlaws under French law in the Aurès during the twentieth century and their relationship to Mohamed Amzian.

1. Definition of Outlaws under French Law

According to the Al-Maany Comprehensive Dictionary, an outlaw is a rebellious and disobedient person who does not submit to the law.¹ Accordingly, outlaws under French law may be defined as those Algerian rebels who defied French law during the occupation and refused to submit or comply with it. Their defiance was sometimes individual and sometimes collective. It also took different forms, ranging from violations of ordinary legal rules to armed rebellion and revolt against the French occupier.

2. Mohamed Amzian: Biographical Background

Mohamed Amzian came from the Beni Bouslimane tribe, specifically the Ouled Djar Allah group. His full name was Mohamed Amzian Ben Mohamed Salah Ben Abderrahmane.² He was popularly known as Sheikh Boubrema.³ Local tradition associates this nickname with a story in which he was said

¹ Al-Maany Comprehensive Dictionary, Arabic-Arabic Dictionary, <https://www.echoroukonline.com>.

² Abdelhamid Zouzou, *The Aurès Uprising of 1879*, National Book Enterprise, Algiers, 1986, p. 61.

³ D. Luciani, "Souvenir de l'insurrection de 1879," *Revue africaine*, Algiers, 1925, pp. 190-196.

to have made a cooking pot speak.¹ The story explains the name by which he became widely known in the region.

Abdelhamid Zouzou places Mohamed Amzian's birth around 1849.² This date is also plausible in light of a document from the period that discusses the uprising. It states that the unrest among the Ouled Daoud tribe occurred in 1878 and that the person who ignited it was 'Mohamed Ben Mohamed Salah Ben Abderrahmane, aged 30.'³ Mohamed Amzian was affiliated with the Rahmaniyya zawiya of Tibermacine. It had been founded by Ibrahim Ou El Hadj, a son of Si Sadek Ou El Hadj, leader of the 1859 uprising.⁴ The original zawiya established by Si Sadek in the village of L'Qsar Ouled Ayoub on Ahmar Khaddou Mountain⁵ had been completely demolished by the French general Devo, and its members were imprisoned.⁶

Mohamed Amzian studied at the Tibermacine zawiya. He also served as the muezzin of its mosque and performed duties connected with leading prayer and preaching.⁷ He later moved to the village of Djar Allah, about 20 km from T'Kout. There he taught the Qur'an and served as imam at the mosque of Sidi Aissa Bougabrine.⁸ He then moved to the village of al-Hammam among the Ouled Lahlouh, a branch of the Ouled Daoud-al-Touaba tribe. He became imam of its mosque and sheikh of its religious zawiya.⁹ This move followed a decision by the French authorities to arrest him after they became suspicious of his conduct toward them. Their concern increased when the Beni Bouslimane tribe appeared ready to recognize him as the awaited Mahdi.¹⁰

In any case, after moving to al-Hammam, Sheikh Mohamed Amzian, or Mohamed Ben Abderrahmane as he is known to some researchers, began to expand his religious influence and increase the number of his supporters, followers, and disciples. By 1879, he had begun openly to defy French law and show hostility toward the French authorities and their local agents.¹¹

¹ Charles-Robert Ageron, *Algerian Muslims and France, 1971-1919*, Arabic trans. M. Hadj Messaoud and A. Bekli, vol. 1, *Dar al-Ra'id lil-Kitab*, Algiers, 2007, p. 118.

² Abdelhamid Zouzou, previously cited work, p. 61.

³ Quoted in Abdelkader Zebadia, "Two Documents on the Aurès Uprisings of 1859-60 and 1879," *Al-Asala*, nos. 60/61, Ministry of Original Education and Religious Affairs, Algiers, August/September 1978, p. 208.

⁴ Abou El Kacem Saadallah, *The Algerian National Movement, 1860-1900*, vol. 10, 6th ed., *Da'irat al-Basa'ir* for Publishing and Distribution, Algiers, 2007, p. 304.

⁵ Abderrahmane Tibermacine, *Si Sadek Ben El Hadj: The Great Uprising, 1844-1859*, 1st ed., Artistic and Graphics Achievements Foundation, Batna, Algeria, n.d., p. 7.

⁶ Abou El Kacem Saadallah, previously cited work, p. 304.

⁷ Abou El Kacem Saadallah, previously cited work, p. 304.

⁸ Mohamed Taher Azzoui, "The Aurès Uprising of 1879," in *History of the Aurès and Its Social and Administrative Structure during the French Occupation, 1837-1854*, First of November Association, *Dar al-Shihab*, Batna, Algeria, n.d., p. 144.

⁹ Charles Feraud, "Notes historiques sur la province de Constantine," *Revue africaine*, Algiers, 1886, pp. 103, 107.

¹⁰ Mohamed Taher Azzoui, previously cited work, pp. 144-145. Abou El Kacem Saadallah regards the story of the speaking pot and the willingness of the Ouled Slimane tribe to recognize Mohamed Amzian as the awaited Mahdi as legends constructed in French accounts and added to a colonial portrayal of the leader as associated with sorcery and superstition. Saadallah notes that the Rahmaniyya, including Mohamed Amzian, were known to be far removed from such exaggerations. See Abou El Kacem Saadallah, previously cited work, p. 304.

¹¹ Yahya Bouaziz, *Algerian Revolts in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 1st ed., *Dar al-Ba'th*, Constantine, Algeria, 1980, p. 239.

3. Reasons for Mohamed Amzian's Rejection of French Law and His Proclamation of the Uprising

Historical sources and studies attribute Mohamed Amzian's rejection of French law and his uprising against colonial rule to several political, social, and economic factors.

3.1. Political Factors

The political factors consisted of the mistreatment of the region's inhabitants by the military regime and officers of the Arab Bureaux, on the assumption that the inhabitants were backward nomads who did not understand the meaning of life, did not deserve care, and had no right to enjoy any of the rights of life as human beings. Nor were they entitled to aspire to the rights guaranteed by the French constitution to the settlers.¹

3.2. Social Factors

The social factors can be summarized in the conduct of the raids and their extortion of the inhabitants' money and property without regard for their social and economic conditions or for their customs and traditions.² Some of these raids even went so far as to violate family honour. They and their sons forced girls to marry them and then abandoned them after pregnancy in order to bring shame upon their families.³ This was the case with Mohamed Belabbas, raid of Ouled Abdi, who seized the property of one of the sheikhs of the Ben Habbara family and fabricated several accusations against him until he was imprisoned. He then assaulted the women of his household. He even married the daughter of Sheikh Mohamed Ben Ibrahim Ben Habbara and returned her to her father when she became pregnant.⁴ His son al-Hassan behaved in almost the same way and was described as the most debauched man on earth.⁵

The inhabitants were also prevented from submitting complaints to higher officials. Those who did complain could face severe retaliation, even death. This is illustrated by the case of four men from the Ouled Daoud communities who complained to the military governor of Batna. Si Ismail Ben Bach Tarzi followed them on their return journey, killed them, and took their mules.⁶

Another social factor was the sharp rivalry between the Ben Gana family and the Ben Chenouf family, which descended from the Bouakkaz family. The dispute concerned political and tribal influence. Each side attempted to discredit the other, fabricate accusations, or incite the local population against its rival. The purpose was to convince the French authorities that the rival was incapable of carrying out his duties. The authorities could then dismiss him and appoint the opposing side in his place.⁷

3.3. Economic Factors

¹ Yahya Bouaziz, "The Uprising of the Population of the Aurès in 1878," *Al-Asala*, nos. 60/61, Ministry of Original Education and Religious Affairs, Algiers, August/September 1978, p. 226.

² Mohamed Taher Azzoui, previously cited work, p. 145.

³ Mohamed Chergui, *The Rahmaniyya Order and Its Role in National Resistance to French Colonialism, with Reference to Other Orders (1830-1881)*, Master's thesis, Institute of Social Sciences, University of Constantine, 1997, p. 280.

⁴ Abdelhamid Zouzou, previously cited work, pp. 87, 96.

⁵ Mohamed Taher Azzoui, "The Aurès Uprising of 1879," *Al-Turath*, First of November Association, no. 1, Dar al-Shihab, Batna, July 1986, p. 64.

⁶ Abdelhamid Zouzou, previously cited work, p. 76.

⁷ Yahya Bouaziz, "The Uprising of the Population of the Aurès, 1978," p. 226.

The inhabitants of the Aurès, like people in other parts of Algeria during the same period, experienced severe economic hardship. A drought beginning in 1877 contributed to widespread poverty and reduced both agricultural and livestock production. The Beni Bouslimane tribe suffered particularly heavy livestock losses. The Ouled Daoud tribe also lost much of its wealth because drought affected the Foug Toub Plain and the Lemdina Plain near the village of Ichmoul.¹

The population also suffered from the severity of tax collectors. Heavy demands were imposed on them to meet the requirements of quids and feudal aghas as signs of loyalty and obedience. They also faced high interest rates on loans obtained from Jewish and European brokers. Such loans were used to meet imposed obligations and to deal with daily economic difficulties.²

Although we acknowledge that these causes alone were sufficient to ignite the uprising, this does not prevent us from identifying other hidden causes. In our view, these were more important than the first, even if they appear indirect. They contributed greatly, and above all, to fuelling the uprising at a time when the French authorities believed that the fire of revolts and uprisings had been extinguished forever, especially in these regions after the torture, abuse, and displacement inflicted on their inhabitants following every earlier revolt or protest. Most of these causes were part of the crimes committed by the occupation against the Algerian people in general and against Sufi orders and their followers in particular. They may be summarized as follows:

- The anti-Arab and anti-Islamic orientation of French policy in Algeria. This was evident in the colonial administration's targeting of zawiya sheikhs and reformers in mountainous regions with large Amazigh populations, in an attempt to create a reality that rejected Arab-Islamic civilizational affiliation. It therefore punished the followers of Sufi orders and the sheikhs of zawiyas in the Aurès Mountains. Their followers were exiled or imprisoned after each uprising was suppressed. This happened to Sheikh Si Sadek Ou El Hadj, muqaddam of the Rahmaniyya order in the Ahmar Khaddou Mountains, and to his sons, who were exiled. The same happened to Sheikh El Hachemi Derdour, muqaddam of the Rahmaniyya order in the Oued Abdi region, who was exiled to Corsica. Their zawiyas were demolished.³ The administration also planned to do the same to Sheikh Mohamed Ben Abderrahmane. It waited for an opportunity and prepared reasons and pretexts through its followers and quids so that it could move against him and his followers after creating the necessary justification. This occurred when he declared the uprising in May 1879.
- The determination of the French military administration, through the quids under its authority, to strip the Sufi orders of all the authority they had exercised over the inhabitants of these regions since the Ottoman period, including spiritual authority. These collaborator quids therefore viewed the men of the zawiyas with suspicion and fear in all their dealings with the population and interpreted such conduct as incitement to wage jihad against the French occupier.⁴

¹ Abdelhamid Zouzou, previously cited work, pp. 35, 39.

² Yahya Bouaziz, "The Uprising of the Population of the Aurès, 1978," p. 226. See also Abdelhamid Zouzou, previously cited work, p. 37.

³ Nassereddine Saidouni, *Algeria: Starting Points and Horizons*, 1st ed., Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, 2000, pp. 69, 83.

⁴ Abdelhamid Zouzou, previously cited work, pp. 34-35.

Sufi orders and their zawiyas had played important political, religious, cultural, and especially social roles within their areas of influence during the Ottoman period. In mountainous districts, they had often compensated for the weakness, or practical absence, of central authority.¹

- Plans for assimilation and Christianization, together with plans to clear fertile land of its inhabitants and drive them toward the mountains and deserts. These plans were devised by extremist intellectuals from the Church, education, and law. At their head was Cardinal Lavigerie, who was appointed Archbishop of Algiers in January 1867. He had considerable influence in military and right-wing circles and had supporters in the French government at the time, including Marshal Niel, Minister of War, and Baroche, Minister of Religious Affairs.²

In the first report he sent, Cardinal Lavigerie did not conceal his intentions toward Islam and Muslims. It stated:

'Bringing the indigenous population into the Christian religion is a sacred duty. We must elevate this people and set aside the mistakes of the past. Our first task is to separate them from the Qur'an. Instead of repeating other mistakes, such as reviving an Arab kingdom, we should at least concentrate on the children and place new teachings in their minds, namely the teachings of the Gospel. We may then mix with them. Otherwise, they should be removed to the desert, far from the civilized population.'³

What confirms these plans is what occurred after the uprising. The French colonial authorities dispossessed the Rahmaniyya followers who had participated in the revolt of their lands on the Lemdina Plain near Ichmoul and distributed those lands to Christian clergy, known as the White Fathers, so that they could settle in the area and spread Christianity among the population. The authorities also seized the Foug Toub Plain and settled European colonists there. In addition, they expelled some families from the Aurès and dispersed them to the north and south.⁴

- The strong and extensive presence of the Rahmaniyya order in the region.⁵ It had become one of the strongest and most widespread Sufi orders among the inhabitants of the Aurès.⁶ The Rahmaniyya was known for its hostility toward the French occupier from the time the latter set foot in Algeria in 1830. This hostility was not due to religious fanaticism among its followers. Rather, it resulted from a spiritual

¹ Elamir Boughdada, *Institutions in Algeria at the End of the Ottoman Period: The Judiciary as a Case Study*, 1185 AH/1771 CE-1235 AH/1837 CE, Al-Kitab wa al-Hikma Publications, Batna, 2009, p. 139.

² Mahdi Bouabdelli, "The French Occupation of Algeria and Popular Resistance in the Spiritual Sphere," *Al-Asala*, no. 8, Ministry of Original Education and Religious Affairs, Algiers, May/June 1972, p. 312. For more on Cardinal Lavigerie's missionary activity, see Saidi Meziane, *The Missionary Activity of Cardinal Lavigerie in Algeria, 1867-1892*, 1st ed., Dar al-Shorouk for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, Algiers, 2009.

³ Quoted in Mahdi Bouabdelli, previously cited work, p. 312.

⁴ Mohamed Taher Azzoui, "The Aurès Uprising of 1879," in *History of the Aurès and Its Social and Administrative Structure during the French Occupation, 1837-1854*, p. 152.

⁵ The Rahmaniyya order is attributed to Mohamed Ben Abderrahmane al-Azhari, who was born between 1126 AH/1714 CE and 1133 AH/1721 CE in the Beni Ismail area of Kabylia. He received his early education at the zawiya of Sheikh al-Siddiq Ben Aarab in Ait Irathen. He then travelled east in 1152 AH/1739 CE, settled in Cairo, and married there. Around 1177 AH/1763 CE, or 1183 AH/1769 CE, he returned to his village and established his zawiya. For further information, see Abou El Kacem Mohamed El-Hafnaoui, *Ta'rif al-Khalaf bi-Rijal al-Salaf*, vol. 2, 1st ed., Al-Risala Foundation, Beirut, 1402 AH/1982 CE, pp. 457-475.

⁶ Ismail Hanfoug, *The Role of Sufi Orders in the Aurès Region, 1844-1931*, Master's thesis, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Hadj Lakhdar University of Batna, 2010-2011, p. 78.

formation that rejected every attempt to strip them of their Islamic identity, exploit them, or enslave them. They therefore took part, individually and collectively, in most nineteenth-century uprisings and played active roles in them.¹ Its presence in the region was thus clearly one of the causes of Mohamed Amzian's uprising in 1879, especially after its followers had been subjected to torture, abuse, killing, imprisonment, and exile by the French colonial authorities after every protest or uprising in which they participated.

• Another cause can be inferred from an analysis of Mohamed Amzian's personality, or Mohamed Ben Abderrahmane, and from tracing his scholarly and doctrinal path. He was affiliated with the Rahmaniyya zawiya of Tibermacine, founded by Sheikh Ibrahim Ben Si Sadek Ou El Hadj, leader of the 1859 uprising, as noted above. He may have inherited the religious leadership of the Rahmaniyya from this sheikh, as Charles Feraud suggested.² By virtue of this religious position, he attempted to revive the path of Ibrahim and his father. His attachment to and constant contact with the Tibermacine zawiya³ made him deeply affected and pained and filled him with a desire for revenge against the occupier and its allied quids. He therefore declared an uprising against them because of the enormity of the crimes committed after the 1859 uprising against Rahmaniyya followers in the region, their leader, and their zawiya.⁴ This is particularly significant because the quids had cooperated with the French enemy in suppressing that uprising.⁵

4. Temporal and Geographical Scope of the Uprising

Mohamed Amzian's uprising of 1879 was short-lived.⁶ It lasted about one month. It began around midday on 30 May 1879⁷ and ended on 27 June of the same year.⁸ Despite this short duration, it expanded geographically. It began at the mosque of al-Hammam village, located on the slope of Mount Ichmoul, north of Oued al-Hammam, a tributary of Oued al-Abiod. It then moved to the village of al-Anasser, about 6 km northeast of Mount Ichmoul. It then retraced its path, heading about 30 km southwest of Arris to include the village of T'Kout. After that, it moved toward Oued Taga, east of Mount Mahmel, which overlooks Oued Abdi from a distance of about 10 km. It then returned to the al-Rab' Plain, about 30 km east of Timgad, and ended in the desert about 300 km south of Mount Chechar.⁹

¹ Djilali Soltani, "The Role of the Rahmaniyya in National Resistance," Proceedings of the Second National Symposium on the Role of Zawiyas during the Resistance and the War of Liberation, Ministry of Mujahideen Publications, Algiers, 2007, p. 187.

² Charles Feraud, op. cit., pp. 103-107.

³ Yahya Bouaziz, *Algerian Revolts in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, p. 239.

⁴ Sheikh Si Sadek Ou El Hadj established his zawiya in the village of L'Qsar on Ahmar Khaddou Mountain after completing his studies at the Rahmaniyya zawiya of Bordj Tolga. He made it an important centre of learning and jihad. This led the French colonial authorities to demolish it and destroy the village of L'Qsar in which it stood. They seized its property and subjected its sheikh and his family to abuse, imprisonment, and exile. For further information, see Salah Mouayed Al-Oqbi, *Sufi Orders and Zawiyas in Algeria*, special ed., Dar al-Basa'ir, Algiers, 2009, pp. 279-280.

⁵ Mohamed Taher Azzoui, "The Aurès Uprising of 1879," in *History of the Aurès and Its Social and Administrative Structure during the French Occupation, 1837-1854*, p. 144.

⁶ Abou El Kacem Saadallah, previously cited work, p. 306.

⁷ Mohamed Taher Azzoui, "The Aurès Uprising of 1879," in *History of the Aurès and Its Social and Administrative Structure during the French Occupation, 1837-1854*, p. 144.

⁸ Abdelhamid Zouzou, previously cited work, p. 49.

⁹ Mohamed Taher Azzoui, "The Aurès Uprising of 1879," in *History of the Aurès and Its Social and Administrative Structure during the French Occupation, 1837-1854*, p. 144.

The uprising therefore extended across parts of three military districts under the French administrative division of the period.¹ The Batna district included al-Hammam, the centre of the uprising, as well as Ichmoul, Arris, Oued Taga, and Timgad. The Biskra district included T'Kout, which was administratively attached to Biskra at the time. The Khenchela district included the village of Chechar.

5. Outbreak of the Uprising and Its Stages

The uprising began on 30 May 1879. El Hachemi Boudiaf, qaid of the Ouled Daoud-al-Touaba tribe, sent two members of his private guard, known as the dawair, to arrest Sheikh Mohamed Amzian, or Mohamed Ben Abderrahmane, in the village of al-Hammam. Boudiaf had been informed that Amzian was leading a developing rebellion. Residents of the village from the Lahalha group confronted the two guards. One was killed and the other was wounded and fled to the village of al-Hadjaj. This incident became the immediate spark of the uprising.²

The uprising passed through three stages. During them, the French occupier employed various methods of killing and abuse. This shows the scale of the crimes committed against the inhabitants of the region in general and against Mohamed Amzian's followers in particular, most of whom were followers of the Rahmaniyya order. At the same time, these stages show the determination of the Sufi orders, especially the Rahmaniyya, to resist the occupier by various means, even when those means were not sufficient to confront its different methods of repression.

The stages of the uprising were as follows:

5.1. The Rebels' Attacks on the Qaids

This stage began immediately after the incident at al-Hammam. Mohamed Amzian's followers and other local inhabitants attacked qaids from several tribes in the region. Their weapons were simple. They included old hunting rifles, a number of swords, and sticks. Despite these limitations, they killed several qaids. These included Bach Tarzi, qaid of the Beni Bouslimane; El Hachemi Boudiaf, qaid of the Ouled Daoud; Mohamed Ben Boudiaf, qaid of the Ouled Oujana; and El Hassan Ben Abbas Ben Mohamed Ben Abbas, qaid of the Ouled Abdi. The last of these also served as muqaddam of the Qadiriyya order in the village of Menaa.³

Events remained favourable to the rebels during this stage until 6 June 1879. Their leader, Mohamed Amzian, therefore sought to expand the geographical scope of the uprising to the whole of the Aurès. He wrote to and called on Rahmaniyya followers in Oum El Bouaghi, Meskiana, Sedrata, and Ain Beida to join the sacred jihad.⁴ This came after he had received the support of El Hachemi Ben Derdour, sheikh

¹ For further information on the French administrative division of the geographical area in which the events took place, see Abdelhamid Zouzou, previously cited work, p. 33. See also Messaoud Othmani, *Aurès of Dignity: Glories and Noble Deeds*, Dar al-Houda, Ain M'lila, Algeria, 2008, p. 125.

² Abdelhamid Zouzou, previously cited work, p. 41.

³ Abou El Kacem Saadallah, previously cited work, p. 305. See also Abdelhamid Zouzou, previously cited work, pp. 42-43.

⁴ Messaoud Othmani, previously cited work, p. 137.

of the Rahmaniyya zawiya of Bouzina, who regarded the uprising as genuinely Islamic and its leader as the one truly awaited to repel and end oppression.¹

French colonial authorities quickly recognized the seriousness of the situation. Their response prevented the Rahmaniyya followers contacted by Mohamed Amzian from joining the uprising and expanding its geographical reach.

A distinguishing feature of this stage was the participation of women from the Aurès alongside the rebels and the prominent role they played. The women encouraged the men to remain steadfast through ululation and wailing. They danced before the bodies of the martyrs so that a sense of defeat would not take hold of the men. They also taunted prisoners and rebuked them for their cowardice.²

5.2. French Counteraction and the Rebels' Retreat

This stage clearly reveals the brutality of the crimes of the occupier, which did not hesitate to apply the principle of collective punishment against Rahmaniyya followers and against the inhabitants of the rebellious areas.

The French authorities sent a military column from Constantine to the Lemdina Plain near Ichemoul. It was led by General Forgemol with the assistance of General Logerot from Batna and a large number of local collaborators. The force met the rebels on the al-Rab' Plain in the Timgad area during the nights of 8 and 9 June 1879. The battle ended in favour of the French forces. They were superior in numbers, equipment, and organization, while the rebels lacked coordinated organization, adequate training, and modern weapons.³

The French army then continued toward the Lemdina Plain while waiting for a second column from Biskra under Colonel Cajar and a third column from Khenchela under Colonel Gaum. These columns burned villages and hamlets along their routes. The Biskra column burned Ghoufi, Tighanimine, al-Hadjaj, Ouled Moussa, and al-Hammam, the centre of the uprising. It also burned crops encountered on the way. The Khenchela column burned Tizgaghin, east of the Lemdina Plain. The three columns then met on the Lemdina Plain and seized it from its inhabitants. They also took control of the Foug Toub Plain.⁴

5.3. Defeat of the Rebels and Their Flight toward Tunisia

After the pressure of the French forces intensified, and their crimes increased against the local inhabitants first and the rebels second following the rebels' defeat at the Battle of al-Rab' and then at the Battle of Khenget Maach near Foug Toub on 15 June 1879,⁵ the rebels and their leader Mohamed Amzian decided to move southeast in an attempt to reach Tunisian territory with their wives, children, and families. The occupation forces and their local collaborators pursued them and succeeded in killing

¹ Abdelhamid Zouzou, *The Aurès during the Period of French Colonization: Political, Economic, and Social Developments (1837-1939)*, Arabic trans. Messaoud Hadj Messaoud, vol. 1, Dar Houma for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, Algiers, 2005, p. 17.

² Yahya Bouaziz, *Algerian Revolts in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, p. 241.

³ Mohamed Taher Azzoui, "The Aurès Uprising of 1879," in *History of the Aurès and Its Social and Administrative Structure during the French Occupation, 1837-1854*, pp. 147-148.

⁴ Messaoud Othmani, previously cited work, pp. 138, 142.

⁵ Mohamed Taher Azzoui, "The Aurès Uprising of 1879," in *History of the Aurès and Its Social and Administrative Structure during the French Occupation, 1837-1854*, p. 148.

some of them, while others died on the way from hunger, thirst, extreme heat, and exhaustion. They were found lying in the open on the sand in small groups scattered here and there. Some were little more than skeletons covered with dried skin, showing the suffering and hardship they endured during this flight.¹

The leader of the uprising, Mohamed Amzian, or Mohamed Ben Abderrahmane, and a small number of his followers reached the Tunisian Djerid in late June 1879. He stayed at the Rahmaniyya zawiya of Sidi Ibrahim, then moved to Nefza with his wife and brother and remained there during August and September. He was later arrested by the Tunisian authorities at the home of Si El Habib Bach, mufti of Gabès, and handed over to the French authorities in Algeria. They tried him and sentenced him to death. The sentence was later reduced to life imprisonment with hard labour, followed by exile to Cayenne in French Guiana in Central America.²

6. Results of the Uprising

The consequences of the uprising were severe for local inhabitants affiliated with the Rahmaniyya order. This applied both to those who had participated in the revolt and to those who had not. It also affected people regardless of whether they had requested safe conduct from the authorities.

In addition, the number of martyrs reached 562, including women, children, and elderly people.³ All villages and hamlets located in the rebels' areas were destroyed or burned. The military column from Khenchela seized 2,236 sheep belonging to the Ouled Daoud and Beni Bouslimane tribes. The column from Biskra seized 5,500 sheep, 1,000 cattle, and 40 mules belonging to the same tribes, while the Constantine and Batna column seized 5,000 head of livestock belonging to the Ouled Daoud.⁴

The tribes that had participated in the uprising were also fined 35,517,270 old French francs. In addition, the Ouled Daoud were required to surrender 1,000 rifles, the Beni Bouslimane 625 rifles, and the Ouled Oujana 80 rifles.⁵

The Ouled Daoud were further dispossessed of fertile lands. The Foug Toub Plain was later distributed to European settlers, while the Lemdina Plain was allocated to Christian clergy.⁶

The confiscated land covered an estimated 2,777 hectares.⁷ The authorities also imposed additional measures on inhabitants who sought protection. They were required to hand over 168 men as hostages. Some families were deported and dispersed outside the Aurès region.⁸

¹ Yahya Bouaziz, *Algerian Revolts in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, p. 243.

² Messaoud Othmani, previously cited work, pp. 148-149.

³ Bouazza Boudrassaia et al., *French Crimes and Genocide in Algeria during the Nineteenth Century*, National Research Projects Series, special edition of the Ministry of Mjahideen, National Centre for Studies and Research on the National Movement and the November 1954 Revolution, Algiers, n.d., p. 145.

⁴ Mohamed Taher Azzoui, "The Aurès Uprising of 1879," in *History of the Aurès and Its Social and Administrative Structure during the French Occupation, 1837-1854*, p. 151.

⁵ Abdelhamid Zouzou, *The Aurès Uprising of 1879*, p. 50.

⁶ Mohamed Taher Azzoui, "The Aurès Uprising of 1879," in *History of the Aurès and Its Social and Administrative Structure during the French Occupation, 1837-1854*, p. 152.

⁷ Ammar Bouhouche, *The Political History of Algeria from the Beginning to 1962*, 3rd ed., Dar al-Basa'ir for Publishing and Distribution, Algiers, 2008, p. 150. See also Mohamed Taher Azzoui, "The Aurès Uprising of 1879," in *History of the Aurès and Its Social and Administrative Structure during the French Occupation, 1837-1854*, p. 154.

⁸ Abdelhamid Zouzou, *The Aurès Uprising of 1879*, pp. 49-51.

Rebel prisoners captured in battle, as well as those handed over to the French by Tunisian authorities, were brought to trial. The following sentences were imposed:

- Death sentences for fourteen people, including the leader of the uprising.
- Ten years of hard labour for ten people.
- Five years of hard labour for seven people.
- Five years of forced residence for two people.
- Two years of imprisonment for seven people. Sixteen people were acquitted.

Shortly afterwards, the French authorities granted a partial pardon to those sentenced to death. The death sentences were replaced by life imprisonment with hard labour.¹

These results clearly show that, at a time when the Algerian people, led by the social and religious institutions then in existence, especially the Sufi institution and foremost the Rahmaniyya order, were resisting this arrogant occupier in pursuit of freedom and in defence of honour, religion, land, and property, the occupier was devising various criminal, brutal, and repressive methods, including the principle of collective punishment, without any regard for human values or for international customs and laws. This raises the following question:

Does speaking about the crimes of the French occupation necessarily mean feeling pain and oppression and lamenting the oppressed, defeated, and submissive Algerian self, rather than speaking about the active, rejecting, resisting, and influential self? Can it also be said that most historical and political writings, and what is said at conferences and seminars, are readings of this pain and a means of discovering the dispossessed and tormented self, more than they are a search for the truth and an attempt to chart a path toward holding the occupier accountable, demanding compensation, and bringing before the International Criminal Court those perpetrators who are still alive?

7. Outlaws under French Law in the Aurès during the Twentieth Century and Their Relationship to Mohamed Amzian

At the beginning of the twentieth century, and specifically in 1917, an Aurès shepherd emerged as a symbol of rebellion and a voice for wounded dignity. He became one of the figures described as outlaws under French law who had a strong place in popular memory. This was Messaoud Ben Zelmat I. Administrative documents date his birth to 1894 near Tafrint in the douar of Zelatou, in the area associated today with T'Kout and Inoughissen. The area was inhabited by the Beni Bouslimane tribe, to which Mohamed Amzian, leader of the 1879 uprising, also belonged.

Messaoud Ben Zelmat worked as a shepherd and remained in that occupation until he was called up for compulsory military service. He decided to flee so that he would not serve the colonial administration. This led him to intensify his stance and broaden the idea of revenge into a revolt against the French presence. He was influenced by his predecessor and kinsman Mohamed Amzian and by what had happened to the latter's followers after the end of his uprising, especially those belonging to the Beni Bouslimane tribe. He therefore decided to avenge them all. This angered the French colonial authorities, which described him in the harshest terms, including rebel, highwayman, scoundrel, thief, and outlaw,

¹ Yahya Bouaziz, *Algerian Revolts in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, p. 244.

with the aim of damaging his image among the local population so that he would not become a model for them.

However, this only increased his fame and turned him into an almost legendary figure. People became even more attached to him after he killed Qaid Messaoud of the douar of Chelia in a public market before a crowd on 20 February 1920. On 7 March 1921, Messaoud Ben Zemat was killed by the French occupation forces after a resistance that lasted nearly five years.¹

Messaoud Ben Zemat I was not the only twentieth-century figure in the Aurès who followed a path similar to Mohamed Amzian by rebelling against French authority and rejecting French law. Another group emerged in the second half of the 1940s. It consisted of sixteen individuals, including one woman. Most belonged to the same tribal group as Mohamed Amzian and Messaoud Ben Zemat, namely the Beni Bouslimane. They also came from the Aurès, particularly the area extending from Inoughissen to Zelatou and southward to T'Kout. This was the same broader geographical environment associated with Mohamed Amzian and Messaoud Ben Zemat.

At the head of this group was the martyr-rebel Hussein Berhail, who had been sentenced to death in Annaba on a criminal charge connected with a common-law case but escaped from prison. He was joined by Garine Belkacem of the Serahna tribe, from the Kimel area adjoining the douar of Zelatou. He was also joined by Sadek Chebchoub, known as 'Gouzir,' and his wife Fatma Aida Lousif, who was responsible for preparing food; Makki Aissi; Messaoud Ben Zemat II; Ramadan Hassouni; Ben Salem Mohamed Salah; Messaoud Mokhtari; Mohamed Belaakel; Lakhdar Ben Kaddour; El Ouardi Ben Abdelhadi; and Messaoud Maach. We should also mention the child Ahmed Kada, who was thirteen years old at the time and was tasked with writing threatening letters to collaborators with France. These individuals and the other members of the group of sixteen rebelled against the French administration and the qaids, just as Mohamed Amzian had done. They thus became an extension of his voice and his uprising.²

Conclusion

The study reaches the following conclusions:

- The rebel Mohamed Amzian, who defied the French occupation and its law, was never a sorcerer, vandal, terrorist, criminal, or highwayman, as the French colonial authorities described and claimed. Otherwise, how can the participation of Rahmaniyya followers in the Aurès in his uprising be explained?
- Mohamed Amzian did not achieve the freedom he sought for Algerians, or at least for the inhabitants of the Aurès. Nevertheless, his rejection of French law and his uprising against French authority contributed to the emergence of revolutionary consciousness among Algerians.
- Mohamed Amzian's defiance of French law in the late nineteenth-century Aurès created a precedent for later figures in the region. It encouraged others to follow a similar path and declare their own resistance.

¹ Salah Messaoudi, "The Rebel Messaoud Ben Zemat Terrified France in the Aurès and Became a Legend," 15 March 2017, <https://www.echoroukonline.com>; Mokhtar Houari, "Thieves of Honour: Knights of Rebellion in the Aurès before the War of Liberation," 11 April 2025, <https://ultraalgeria.ultrasawt.com>.

² Djemaa Ben Zeroual, "Thieves of Honour: Knights of Rebellion in the Aurès before the War of Liberation," 11 April 2025, <https://ultraalgeria.ultrasawt.com>.

Messaoud Ben Zelmat I is a clear example. France declared him an outlaw near the end of the second decade of the twentieth century. Like Mohamed Amzian, he belonged to the Beni Bouslimane tribe.

- Defiance of French law was not limited to the sixteen insurgents of the 1940s. It had precedents many decades earlier, reaching back to the nineteenth century and the early period of occupation. Mohamed Amzian in the Aurès was one such example. He rejected French law and refused to submit to it.
- The twentieth-century outlaws under French law in the Aurès were linked to Mohamed Amzian either by common descent from the Beni Bouslimane tribe and by the same geographical space, which included Zelatou, Inoughissen, Kimel, Sidi Ali, Ichmoul, and Arris, as was the case for most of them, or only by belonging to the same geographical space. The martyr Garine Belkacem, for example, belonged to the Serahna tribe and came from the Kimel area. This indicates that these later rebels were influenced by Mohamed Amzian and his uprising, took him as a model, and decided to continue his path and follow his example.
- Those who defied French law were never criminals or highwaymen, as the French colonial authorities described them. Rather, they were free and honourable men, imbued with moral and human values, who rejected the policies of oppression and subjugation imposed on them and on their fellow Algerians by the French occupier under the pretext of enforcing the law and placing the law above all else.
- These outlaws contributed to the formation of revolutionary consciousness among Algerians. They also became figures of admiration, pride, and respect for many Algerians. Songs and poems were composed about them. Stories and narratives about their exploits circulated orally and were later recorded by researchers and historians.

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