



Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash: Al-Amīr ‘Abdelkāder’s Khalifa in Ouled Nā’il Region

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Abstract: It is known that the tribes of the Awlād Nā’il region responded to Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir’s call for resistance and supported him and stood by him and at the forefront of it was Abd al-Salām ibn al-Gandūz, who was appointed by El-Amir as a leader over the Awlād Nā’il, and later became his nephew, Al-Sharīf Belaḥrash, the successor of the El-Amir over Awlād Nā’il and his right hand that helped him in resisting colonialism. This study examines the pivotal role of Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash, Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir’s Khalifa, in the Awlād Nā’il region's resistance against French colonialism. It highlights how the Awlād Nā’il tribes, led initially by Abd al-Salām ibn al-Gandūz and later by Al-Sharīf Belaḥrash, provided unwavering support to Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir. This paper

specifically focuses on Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash's leadership and his crucial contributions to the resistance in the central high hills.

.Keywords: Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir, the Popular resistance ,Abdul Salam bin Qanduz, Awlād Nā’il , El-Al-Sharīf Belahrash .

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of French colonisation, the Awlād Nā’il region has actively supported popular resistance movements through various means. Among the most prominent of these resistances was that led by Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir, whom the Awlād Nā’il pledged allegiance to, supported, and fought alongside.

This was particularly true for al-Zāwiya sheikhs who devoted themselves to spreading knowledge among both the elite and the general public, instilling spiritual values and principles, and embedding a deep love for the homeland to combat and eliminate French colonialism.

Among the most esteemed of these sheikhs, who played a crucial role in the Awlād Nā’il region and remain a source of pride for the area, is Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash. Based on this, the present study raises the following questions: How can the jihadist and educational roles of Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash be represented and analysed?



2. The Personality of Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash

2.1. Lineage and Birth:

Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash is the son of Al-Ahrash, son of Al-Qandouz, son of Al-Ahrash, son of Ahmed, son of Al-Gharbi, son of Al-Ghwini, son of Mohammed, son of Abderrahman, son of Salem, son of Amlik, son of Mohammed, and is nicknamed “Nā’il.”

He was born in June 1803 in the town of Zaghez, located in Hassi Bahbah (Djelfa), and was appointed as the khalifa (deputy) of Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir over the Awlād Sidi Nā’il tribe.

2.2. Upbringing and Education

He was raised in a blessed household under the care of his parents and was among those favoured by the divine guidance. He thoroughly memorised the Holy Quran during his early years. At the age of 18, he travelled to seek knowledge and spiritual training under Shaykh Mukhtār al-Jilālī in Awlād Jallāl. There, he studied the sciences of Sufism and Islamic jurisprudence (Sharia), and upon completing his studies, he was granted Ijazah (certification) written by the hand of his teacher, who also invoked divine blessings upon him and authorised him to pass on the Sufi path and to establish aal-Zāwiya in his homeland. He remained in the area for 18 years.

Sheikh El-Sharif also studied under other renowned scholars, including Sheikh Mohammed Ben El-Saeed Ben Barakat and Sheikh Mohammed El-Zin Ben Barakat, both of whom were unparalleled in the fields of jurisprudence and Qur’anic exegesis. Sheikh El-Sharif excelled in the study of Al-Ṣaḥīḥayn (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī wa-Muslim), Al-Muwatta, Ash-Shifa by Qadi Iyad, Al-Shamā’il li-l-Tirmidhī, Al-Mawāhib al-Ladunniyya, and Al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaghīr. He also mastered Arabic grammar, rhetoric, logic, astronomy, jurisprudential foundations, morphology, and Sufism, demonstrating remarkable proficiency in all these disciplines (Saeed Belkacem, online source).

2.3. Al-Zāwiya of Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash

Sheikh El-Sharif established his Zāwiya in 1838. It serves as a refuge for the poor, needy, widows, and orphans. Many people have benefited from his generosity and knowledge. More than 300 students graduated from his Zāwiya, having memorised the Qur’an and learned the foundational principles of religion. This granted him a strong reputation, and his counsel was widely respected in the region. He was a living example of devotion to the dissemination of religious knowledge and a sincere servant to the Muslim community¹.

3. Architectural and Social Role of al-Zāwiya of Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash

Al-Zāwiya was constructed in an authentic Arab architectural style; however, it is evident that the construction was not an end in itself but rather a means to serve the greater purpose of preserving Islamic culture in the region. Upon entering through the main gate, one finds a vast courtyard surrounded by three wings adorned with arches characteristic of the Ottoman Era.



These wings housed rooms designated for reading and teaching purposes.

It was a place full of paradoxes evoking both the terrifying memories of fear and persecution under French domination and the serene and spiritual recollections of solitude and devotion during Al-Khalwa (spiritual retreat). The presence of the Sheikh, the patched robes of the dervishes, the generosity of the wealthy, the vibrant scene of learning and teaching, and even the clinking of utensils carrying the promise of freshly prepared food all combined to make al-Zāwiya the Sheikh's home, a city for students, a shelter for the needy, and a haven for travellers.

Al-Zāwiya hosted a significant number of students and accommodated many travellers. Each evening, as the town's gates closed, a call would echo:

"O needy ones, hurry to al-Zāwiya. O hungry ones, come to al-Zāwiya! O fearful ones, seek refuge in al-Zāwiya. If the town closes its doors, al-Zāwiya's doors remain ever open."
(Saeed Belkacem, online source).

4.His Jihadist Endeavors

The tribes of Awlād Nā'il were not isolated from the events unfolding in northern Algeria, particularly since these tribes customarily migrated each summer to the Tell region to procure grains, market their surplus dates from the south, and sell livestock to cover their transactional expenses.

This seasonal migration enabled the tribes to remain aware of the broader national situation, including foreign Crusader invasions and the corresponding popular resistance to them. Although these tribes lacked modern political consciousness, they were not devoid of patriotism. Their religious devotion and

attachment to the land formed a deep-rooted foundation for their willingness to defend both of them.

Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir turned his attention toward the south and east in an effort to enlist the desert tribes before the French could reach them. These regions were of strategic importance due to their large populations, which could supply resistance forces with men, livestock, and financial resources.

Among the most important tribes the Emir sought to bring under his influence were the Awlād Nā’il. In 1836, he sent letters to their leaders and found them ready to embrace his cause. All the tribes responded positively and pledged their allegiance. The Emir appointed Sheikh Abd al-Salām ibn al-Gandūz, a prominent and devout leader of the Awlād Nā’il, as their commander.

Due to his advancing age, Abd al-Salām gradually relinquished most of his leadership responsibilities to his nephew, Sheikh Al-Sharīf Belaḥrash, who possessed all the qualities of a true leader and went on to play a significant role in guiding the Awlād Nā’il tribes under the Emir's banner. Sheikh El-Sharif remained loyal and devoted to the Emir until the end.

In parallel with Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir’s military victories during this period, he also gained new supporters in the High Plateaus and the Sahara, which enabled him to negotiate from a position of strength and sign the Treaty of Tafna with General Bugeaud on 30 May 1837. The treaty consisted of 51 clauses, including the following:

- Division of zones of influence: France retained control of the western regions, such as Mostaganem, Oran, and Arzew, while the Emir maintained authority over the remaining areas, including the port of Chekroun and Tlemcen. France also held Algiers, Blida, Kolea, and the Mitidja plain up to Oued El-Khroub, whereas the entire Al-Tiṭrī Province remained under Algerian control.



- Protection of French military agents: The treaty ensured that individuals such as the Kouloughlis and members of the Douair and Zmelah tribes could choose to either migrate to occupied cities or remain on their lands with full rights to use them as they wished.
- Protection of French interests: The Emir pledged not to surrender any coastal post to a foreign power without French approval and agreed to procure weapons and ammunition exclusively from France.
- Regulation of bilateral relations: All communications and transactions between the two sides were to be conducted through officially appointed consuls.
- Despite the drawbacks of this treaty, it represented a strategic and diplomatic victory for Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir. It marked an official recognition by France through the figure of General Bugeaud of the Emir’s state and authority. However, it also granted him additional time to consolidate and expand his influence over new territories. The Emir's domain eventually extended eastward to the Maghnia region and southward beyond the Wādī Sūf.

The Emir took advantage of the truce by undertaking a journey beginning in August 1837 to the central High Plateaus and the edges of the Sahara. He reached the Amour and Goura mountains in the eastern part of the region, where Sheikh Abd al-Salām sent him the Awlād Nā’il tribes led by Sheikh Al-Sharīf Belaḥrash. They pledged allegiance to him and accompanied him on his journey through the area, actively promoting his cause. Sheikh Al-Sharīf Belaḥrash acted as his guide, spiritual advisor, and political counsellor , particularly in matters concerning

influential local figures. The Awlād Nā’il people served as his security apparatus, ensuring the Emir’s protection during this period.

In 1843, Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash joined Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir Ibn Muhieddine’s army. The Emir, impressed by the Sheikh’s vast knowledge, sharp intellect, and strong personality, appointed him as the secretary of his office and later as his advisor. In the same year, the Emir promoted him to the rank of Khalifa (deputy) for the southern region.

Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash participated in most of the Emir's major battles, including the Battle of Djurdjura in 1846, and later in western Algeria. He remained by the Emir's side during his retreat to Morocco and accompanied him back to the Awlād Sidi Nā’il region in Djelfa, where he provided significant material and human support.

This continued until Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash eventually surrendered at the same time as Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir in 1847, handing himself over to *General de Lamoricière*. Following the Emir's imprisonment and exile in France, Sheikh El-Sharif was incarcerated in the Boughar prison (Qaṣr al-Bukhārī), then transferred to Médéa prison, and finally placed under house arrest at the residence of Ibn Yaḥyā ibn ‘Īsā, before eventually being released.

Thus, Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash’s activities extended beyond spiritual and social endeavours; they encompassed a full-fledged jihadist dimension in defence of his homeland against French colonial rule.

He later married Maria, who became known as Fatna Al-‘Alja. French writer Fromentin wrote about her and her sister, noting: **-"The two young women accepted Arab clothing and traditions, adopting their husbands' language and customs out of sincere conviction, even after the end of the resistance."**



It is worth noting that his first wife, Hafsa (also known as Asma), daughter of Sheikh Mokhtar, passed away earlier, leaving him with a son who died at the age of 16.

Furthermore, the descendants of Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash trace their lineage back to Fatna Al-‘Alja. She is buried in what is today known as Al-Majhouda Cemetery in the city of Djelfa. Contrary to some accounts, she did not die a violent death but passed away peacefully. She was labelled “majhouda” (the denied) because she did not belong to the local elite and was thus buried outside the official cemetery, where her husband lay, near al-Zāwiya. However, as her grave attracted numerous burials from surrounding tribes, the community eventually revised its stance, and other notable figures were buried there.

The cemetery later became known as the Ali Ben Danidina Cemetery after the burial of a revered saint at the site.

5.El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash Through Western Eyes

The authors Gouvion described him in their book “Notables of the Maghreb”, published in 1921, on page 98, stating:

"He was the most renowned muqaddam of the Rahmaniyya Sufi order among the Awlād Nā'il. After his father's death, El-Sharif returned from the Zāwiya of Awlād Djellal to his kin among the Awlād El-Ghwini and devoted most of his time to teaching and charitable works. When Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir's resistance began, El-Sharif was deeply convinced by the principle of jihad, and offered his services to the Emir with intelligence, leading with such rare bravery that Abd al-Qādir took notice of him and made him one of his key deputies."

General de Braye, in his memoirs published in Paris in 1894, referred to him as a “**great personality**.” Likewise, Eugène Fromentin, upon visiting Djelfa in 1853, was deeply impressed by the man’s presence and genius. He portrayed his features in the now-famous portrait of the Sheikh and described his qualities and demeanour in his book, “**A Summer in the Sahara**”, published in Paris in 1912. Fromentin wrote:

"I behold before me this noble gentleman... of gentle manners, one of the wealthiest and most valiant leaders... the most respected among them. This may be attributed to his vast fortune, his high political status, and his distinguished military past."

He further described him as “**a tall and noble man with prominent eyes, a calm and serene face, nearly beardless.**” Fromentin also noted the Sheikh’s wealth, stating that he owned massive flocks of sheep and nearly six thousand (6,000) camels alone (Saeed Belkacem, online source).

6.Death and Legacy

Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Ahrash passed away on Wednesday, October 9, 1864, and was buried in the cemetery of al-Zāwiya in Ain Chennouf, Djelfa.

1. He left behind numerous writings, including sermons and letters. Among his preserved works is an annotated commentary (tadhil) on the didactic poem “**Al-Wa’dhiyyat**” by Shaykh Mukhtār al-Jilālī .²



7. Conclusion

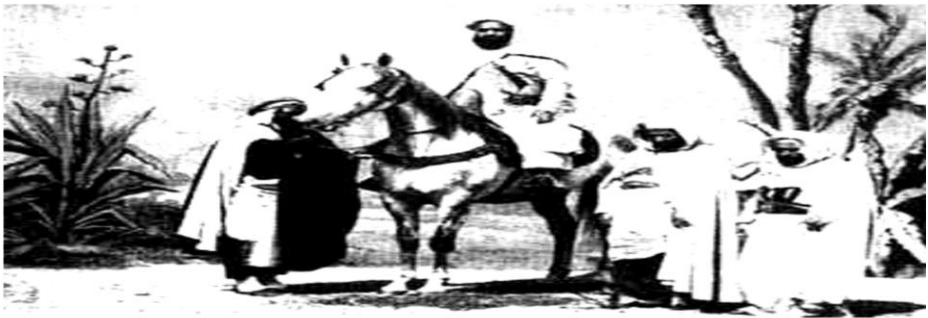
It is well known that the tribes of the Awlād Nā'il region responded positively to Al-Amīr 'Abd al-Qādir's call to resist colonial rule. They supported him and stood by his side even in the most difficult circumstances. At the forefront of this support was Abd al-Salām ibn al-Gandūz, whom the Emir appointed as the leader of the Awlād Nā'il. Later, his nephew, El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash, became the Emir's khalifa (deputy) for the Awlād Nā'il and his right-hand man in the resistance throughout the central High Plateaus.

Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash was characterized by all the qualities of leadership and command, which enabled him to play a crucial role in guiding the Awlād Nā'il tribes under the Emir's banner. He remained loyal and faithful to Al-Amīr 'Abd al-Qādir until the end.

His scholarly contributions were equally significant in this regard. Through the founding of his Zāwiya, he played a key role in the education and moral instruction of his community. He became a respected figure whose words carried weight and whose prayers were sought. He stood as a living embodiment of knowledge, religious dedication, and service to the broader Muslim community.

8.Appendices:

Appendix (01): Photographs of Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash and Al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir.



Source: Sanoussi Naibi, *The Contribution of the Awlād Nā’il Tribes to Popular Resistance Through French Sources (1836–1890)*, Master’s Thesis, Department of History, University of Algiers 2, 2014, p. 174.

Appendix (02): al-Zāwiya of Sheikh El-Sharif Ibn al-Aḥrash, located to the right of the Old Mosque in the Al-Burj neighborhood. Photograph taken in 1960.





7. Citations(*):

¹ - Ali Naâs, *Tanbih al-Ahfad bi-Manaqib al-Ajdad* [Reminder to the Descendants of the Merits of the Ancestors], no edition, Royghi Press, Algeria, 2016, pp. 66–67.

² - Ali Naâs, *Op.cit* ,p. 68

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