

Religious Coexistence: Emir Abdelkader as A Model

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Abstract:

Coexistence or communal living is an existential and civil necessity rooted in a natural instinct shared by all humans. The inclination to live with others is an existential truth imposed by nature, not derived from civil or political considerations. Living without the other is not human nature. As the ancient philosophers said: "if you want to live alone, you must be either a God or an animal." Hence, coexistence should not be merely theoretical or a topic for discussion, but rather a real, existential fact. Thus, translating it into action on the ground is an expression of humanness, while abandoning it is a clear sign of one's absence from the ranks of humanity. In this research paper, we will highlight a human experience recorded in history, an example of Emir Abdelkader EL-Husseini's embodiment and representation of humanity as presented by the authentic Islamic doctrine, not the version of Islam manufactured in laboratories. One of the most remarkable experiences known to humanity was Emir Abdelkader of Algeria's defence of Christians in 1860 against attacks by the Druze. Algerians valiantly defended their Christian brothers based on the principle that they were Ahl EL Kitab (people of the book), offering them material, moral, and security support. Yet many thinkers attempt to interpret this heroic act as a mere desire for power and prestige. In this paper, we aim to celebrate a practical experience of coexistence, not just rhetorical flourishes and empty declarations like those we often see today, filled with

speechless and condemnations, while in practice, all we do is shed tears.

Key Words: Coexistence, Tolerance, Love, Transcendence.

Introduction:

Terrorism is one of the human concepts that has displayed an unparalleled fluidity in human discourse, to the point that it has become a phenomenon resistant to precise definition and control. The multiplicity of contexts surrounding it confuses the mind and impedes a clear understanding of its true nature. From “illegitimate terrorism” to “legitimate terrorism”, everyone rejects being labeled with this term. The referent of “terrorist” remains open to interpretation. However, this semantic possibility has gradually narrowed until the term became almost exclusively and precisely associated with adherents of the Islamic religion. Thus, the Muslim in the western perspective, has become a monster and bloodthirsty “vampire”, and that’s so called the Islamophobia, defined as “fears or prejudices that take the form of violent aggressive behaviors, symbolic or physical toward Muslims, reaching the level of physical assaults. In this way, Islamophobia equates to racial discrimination against a segment of western society due to its religious affiliation...”

An objective investigation into the phenomenon of Islamophobia reveals a political and imperialistic exploitation of a collection of myths and historical events. If we were to conduct a statistical comparison between the victims of the inquisition courts, for example, and those who have perished in religious conflicts involving Muslims, Christians, or Jews, we would find that the latter pale in number. This is not to justify or excuse, but to offer reasoning. Taking a life unevenly can never be legitimized by any religious or legal framework. Any doctrine that permits such actions would, by definition, be the mother of terrorism in the world.

Nevertheless, some western thinkers continue to strive to link this suspicion to the Islamic creed. Therefore, we must look to the history of this faith rather than focusing solely on its current manifestations, such as those represented by ISIS. Hence, we rely on Emir Abdelkader’s experience in protecting Christians in 1860, a historical incident that stands in stark contrast to the actions of the extremist groups who embody the term “terrorism” in all its historical and cultural dimensions.

From Blessing to Curse:

The Paradox of Pluralism the Arab nation represents a cultural and historical entity forged through the convergence of multiple civilizations and cultures. Political and military forces have played a dominant role in shaping and molding these contradictions. The diverse ethnic components within Islamic society did not naturally or willingly merge of their own accord— history affirms this reality. Had these ethnicities formed a moral and ethical contract with authority, historical records would not be rife with revolts and uprisings? Consequently, the indicators of instability within the social fabric of civil society are ever- present. A preliminary observation of both historical and contemporary Arab civil and political movements reveals that cultural and ethnic differences have often served as fuel for discord and division. Iraq, for example, has seen its sectarian plurality— particularly between Sunnis and Shiites—exploited politically and in the media to accelerate its fragmentation. Other sects became mere media fodder, within which honor was violated and bloodshed permitted. The root of these issues, however, lies in economic and security interests manipulated by imperialist agendas. Historically, the political trajectory of societies demonstrates that cultural pluralism has always been available for exploitation by political parties. Additionally, the intellectual frameworks of leadership elites in Eastern societies have contributed to the distortion and manipulation of religious doctrines. In principle, submission (*taslīm*) is the core of religious devotion in Islamic legislation. However, history shows that submission has often taken on a negative connotation within various social contexts. It has come to mean obedience to human interpretations of religious law—interpretations shaped by the cultural and personal tools of the interpreter—rather than genuine compliance with divine commands. This misinterpretation has been a key tool in distorting the image of Islam, a point emphasized by British journalist Robert Fisk, who called for a return to Islam's historical roots in order to rediscover its values of tolerance and coexistence. He stressed that we must look to the past, not to contemporary groups claiming affiliation with Islam, as such affiliation is easy to claim but difficult to embody. True representation of faith requires objective standards and meaningful practice. If we study pluralism and emotional conflict as a research phenomenon and approach it objectively, we will find that pluralism is, in essence, a social blessing. However, once it is politically manipulated, it transforms into a curse and a destructive tool against the social fabric. The Damascus Incident of 1860—commonly known among the public as the "Fitna of 1860"—will serve as the focal

point of our study, from which we will extract lessons in tolerance and values of civilizational coexistence through the actions of Emir Abdelkader of Algeria. At the heart of political manipulation lies economic interest. Some researchers argue that France's economic interests were the hidden motive behind the sectarian conflict. At the time, Damascus was a major center for silk production, particularly in the Al-Qaymariyya district— known as "Little India." This coincided with a decline in silk production in other major silk-producing countries, notably France and China, due to the death of the silkworm. In response, France sought to relocate Damascus's silk manufacturers to Algeria, which was under French occupation. However, the industrialists refused to leave Syria. In retaliation, the colonial power orchestrated a sectarian conspiracy, culminating in the Damascus incident— whose roots lay in the earlier tensions of Mount Lebanon.

The mountain strife:

Cultural and sectarian pluralism is almost an inherent and natural feature of Eastern societies. The ethno-sectarian composition of the Levantine society—specifically Syria and Lebanon—is diverse and multifaceted. The current political structure of Lebanon still reflects this plurality. In this context, we focus on a historical event that recorded a sectarian conflict between two social groups in Lebanon: the Maronite Christians and the Druze, known as the "strife of the Mountain" (Fitnat al- Jabal). The term itself shifted in meaning from a geographic and natural designation to a symbol of sectarian coexistence and later, of sectarian strife. Moreover, its composition consists of "Christians and Druze, with a small number of Muslims and Shia (Mutawalis) living among them. The Christian population in the mountain numbered around ninety thousand males, the majority of whom were Maronites, followed by Greek Orthodox, and then Greek Catholics. The Druze, numbering over fifteen thousand were known for their strength, valor, generosity, and noble conduct. However, longstanding hostility existed between them, with some affiliating with the Qays faction and others with the Yemen faction. This enmity led to recurring wars between them." (Abkāriyūs, p. 83)

In May 1860, a full-scale civil war erupted between the Druze and the Christians—a war ignited and further fueled by the Ottomans. Within little more than a month, Lebanon had become a wide battlefield of massacres and arson. In a tragic turn, many Christians were deceived by the official promises of Turkish pashas and commanders, believing they would be

protected. British historian Churchill recounts: "Christians, by the hundreds, approached various Turkish military posts spread across the mountain. There, they were politely asked to surrender their weapons as a sign of trust. Once disarmed, they were herded into open squares. Then, the Druze and Turkish soldiers attacked and slaughtered them all." (Churchill, 1982, p. 281)

The Damascus Incident:

The conflict did not remain confined to Mount Lebanon. The virus of sectarian strife spread to Damascus, incited by local elites who encouraged the Druze to extend the violence. Emir Mohammed Ibn Abdelkader describes this escalation: "The situation worsened in Mount Lebanon, and the Druze gained the upper hand. Influential figures incited them to target the Christians in their own town, promising them assistance and tempting them with wealth. The Druze agreed to the plan once they had finished with their matters in the mountain." (al-Qadir, 1964, p. 632)

Damascus—particularly those residing in the Al-Qaymariyya district—represented a socio-economic elite with substantial financial influence. This economic power enabled them to participate in political life, making them a target for political strategies aimed at dismantling the economic foundations of the Christian community. Historian Mohammed Kurd Ali summarizes the tragedy as follows: "In essence, a mob of Muslims and Druze rose against the Christians of Damascus, killing, looting, and setting fire to their neighborhood for five consecutive days until it was entirely destroyed. This happened in a city once known for its tolerance and gentleness. The criminals tarnished Damascus's reputation after its citizens had lived together for centuries in harmony and loyalty. As a result, thousands of Christian families fled to Beirut, Cyprus, and Egypt, where they settled permanently." (Ali, 2021, p. 26)

Kurd Ali also underscores the political complicity behind the sectarian violence: "Historians almost unanimously agree that the state either incited the mob or turned a blind eye to their actions, allowing them to commit such atrocities." (Ali, 2021, p. 26)

Emir Abdelkader and the Damascus Incident of 1860:

Emir Abdelkader al-Hasani (1808–1883) was an Algerian figure whose values and conduct transcended both cultural and geographic boundaries. His personal biography is often seen as a mirror of Algerian national history itself. In the eyes of the West, his cultural symbolism was distinctly "Oriental." As French

writer Martine Le Coz noted upon his arrival in Amboise, “he represented the East itself for the French locals—an embodiment of the East in flesh and blood, personified by Emir Abdelkader.” A fundamental divergence is evident between Arab and Western historians in their readings of his character. Several historians have depicted him as an opportunist driven by a desire for wealth. Among them are the Tunisian historian Abdeljalil Temimi and Ibrahim Al-Samak, editor of the works of Abkāriyūs. In a footnote to a chapter Abkāriyūs dedicated to Emir Abdelkader, Al-Samak writes: “During his stay in Damascus, the Emir was keen on acquiring homes and agricultural lands, and sought wealth by any means possible. Initially, the French government granted him an annual pension of 150,000 francs, which later increased to 300,000 francs. He also pretended to be in poverty when appealing to the Khedive of Egypt for more financial support.” (Abkāriyūs, p. 263) This portrayal by modern historians attempts to reduce the Emir to a mere opportunist and materialist. However, in my modest opinion—as someone who does not claim to be a historian—Abkāriyūs’s firsthand account seems more credible than the critiques of Muslim Arab historians. The following excerpt offers compelling psychological and behavioral evidence refuting claims of opportunism: “When the noble and honorable Emir Abdelkader—renowned for his scholarly excellence, pure lineage, and virtuous character—witnessed the horrors, chaos, and devastation in Damascus, he was moved by compassion and a sense of noble duty. His chivalrous nature compelled him to aid the Christian community and rescue them from their plight. He immediately took action, deploying his men across the markets, streets, and alleys. He intervened courageously among the mobs and extinguished the flames of violence. He saved countless men, children, girls, and women from the swords of injustice, replacing their fear with safety. He brought them into his home, where he provided them with fine meals and generous care. During this period, he spent a significant sum of money. His rank soared, and his status rose in the eyes of kings” (Abkāriyūs, p. 256). Psychological studies affirm that true opportunists and misers are rarely, if ever, capable of genuine generosity. The noble acts described here reflect a man of virtue, compassion, and action—traits fundamentally at odds with the accusations of greed and self-interest.

Among the historians who rendered justice to Emir Abdelkader and his heroic stance toward the Christians was the Syrian historian Suhail Zakkar. In the following passage, he commends the Emir’s noble character in contrast to those historians who

sought to diminish his legacy by portraying him as culpable. Zakkār writes: “Calamities multiplied upon them—that is, the Christians—and their confusion increased. But fate granted them the presence of a noble man among the Muslims, one who sympathized with their suffering and pitied their misfortune. This nobleman was none other than Emir Abdelkader al-Jaza’iri, whose fame reached across the world. His generosity and virtue were felt by all the Christians of the Levant alike. He never missed an opportunity to defend them. He met several times with the governor and the city’s dignitaries, including notables from the surrounding villages. He urged them to remain calm, to embrace peace, to renounce violence, and to leave the Christians alone. He clearly explained the disastrous consequences that would befall them if they proceeded with violence, warning them that such acts would result in the loss of their land. He demonstrated to them that the killing of Christians was neither legally nor religiously justifiable.” (Zakkār, 2006, p. 254)

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