

The French policy of confiscating Algerian land in the coastal regions (1830-1870): The Metidja Plain as a Case Study

Dr. Harma Abd Alkarim¹, Dr. Tahri Abdelmalek².

¹Manuscript Laboratory of Algerian Manuscripts in Africa, University of Adrar Ahmed Draia (Algeria).

²University of Adrar Ahmed Draia (Algeria).

The Author's E-mail: harma30@univ-adrar.edu.dz¹,

abdelmalek.tahri@univ-adrar.edu.dz²

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Abstract:

Since its occupation of Algeria, the French colonial power has used various means and methods to confiscate land in order to encourage settlement and stimulate the French economy. One of the most prominent strategies employed was the creation of a series of unjust laws and regulations that enabled it to take control of Algerian property. The coastal areas were among the first and most important regions where the French concentrated their presence, due to their strategic location and abundance of fertile land. The first attempts to seize land began in the M'tidja plain. Our central research question is therefore as follows: What were the main means and methods used by the colonial administration to confiscate land in the M'tidja plain? What was the impact of these actions on Algerian society?

Keywords: Land confiscation; Settlement movement; French economy; M'tidja plain; Algerian society.

1. Introduction:

Since the occupation of Algeria, the French authorities have pursued a policy of repression and coercion against the Algerian people in order to impose a de facto situation. On the one hand, this policy was aimed at promoting the settlement process and revitalising the French economy; on the other hand, it was aimed at impoverishing the Algerian people, dividing up their property and undermining their resistance at its roots. A series of arbitrary and punitive laws

were enacted, as the issue of settlement and the seizure of agricultural land was a primary concern for the French colonisers. They were fully aware that their future in Algeria depended on strengthening their presence through settlement, which could only be achieved by controlling the land. They therefore worked to confiscate land in various regions of the country, with the coastal areas being the first to be dominated. Among these coastal regions, the M'tidja plain was one of their first targets.

In this research paper, we will shed light on land confiscation in the M'tidja plain by focusing on the main means and methods used by the French administration to control the plain, while highlighting the significant repercussions on Algerian society. We will address the following research questions: What were the main means and methods used by the colonial administration to confiscate land in the Metidja plain? What was the impact of these actions on Algerian society?

The importance of this research lies in its focus on the issue of land and its impact on Algerian society, which is still experiencing some of its complexities today. This topic is of great importance because it examines the arsenal of laws, regulations, military strategies and judicial measures, especially those related to the promotion of European immigration and its connection to the settlement project, as well as the securing of real estate reserves in Algeria. Land is at the heart of the settlement issue.

The aim of this research is to shed light on aspects that have remained somewhat hidden in the literature on the colonial phenomenon in Algeria, particularly as regards the economic and social dimensions. National writings in this field are scarce; when they do exist, they often deal with generalities or focus on one region rather than another. The aim of this study is therefore to focus on the M'tidja plain and to describe the main measures taken.

In order to cover the subject comprehensively, this study is divided into an introduction, five sections and a conclusion.

2. Geographical setting of the Metidja plain:

The Metidja plain is a vast and extensive plain located between Algiers and Blida, rising 50 metres above sea level (Al-Madini, 1948, p. 25). It is located in the central region, south of the city of Algiers. Before the occupation, it

belonged to the Sultan's domain, which included the capital and its surrounding areas. The region of Algiers is mainly composed of two different geographical zones with different terrain and structure: one is a rugged, complex hilly area known as the coastal mass, while the other is a fertile plain known as the M'tidja plain. The Ottoman administration divided this region into several territories, each consisting of a collection of farms and agricultural lands, some of which were under the control of the Beylik, while others were owned by individuals from urban areas, Turks, or various groups of farmers (Husseini, 2013, p. 14).

The Metidja plain constitutes the second part of the region of Algiers and its suburbs, after the coastal mass. It is a natural extension of the northern plains of Algeria and covers an area of 130,000 hectares. A narrow mountain range near Miliana separates it from the coastal mass. It is bordered to the south by the Blidean Atlas and extends eastwards to the Boudaou river. The plain almost overlooks the sea to the east, except for the narrow coastal sand hills that separate the sea from the plain and extend from El-Harrach to the Boudaou river. This means that the plain extends from the west of Hajout to Bouzguza mountain. To the north, it is bordered by Bouzaréah Mountain, or the high ridge that runs along the coast from the city of Algiers to Cherchell, west of the capital (Husseini, 2013, p. 16).

The German traveller Heinrich von Maltzan (1826-1874), one of the most important observers of Algerian reality during the French occupation, described the Metidja plain with a degree of accuracy and neutrality: "...it is in fact a relatively barren area, almost devoid of trees, with only short bushes growing here, and it contains only scattered plots of land converted into wheat fields, which shine like an oasis. Nevertheless, the surrounding Atlas Mountains give it a certain charm and majesty..." (Maltzan, 2009, p. 138) (Boutajine, 2013, p. 87).

3. The first attempts to conquer the plain:

Alexis de Tocqueville stated: "In Algiers, as elsewhere, we can only take root there by dispossessing the tribes of their lands... Algiers is therefore the place where we should concentrate our greatest efforts for the sake of settlement" (de Tocqueville, 2008, p. 66). To achieve this, the French occupation authorities adopted a policy of plunder, pillage and impoverishment as a permanent means of exhausting and weakening the population. From the very beginning, they unleashed their hands on the people's property through confiscation, seizure and

acquisition in various ways, despite the surrender treaty that stipulated the protection of the people's property and wealth (Qenan, 1994, p. 117). They even committed acts of vandalism in the city of Algiers, uprooting iron fences, demolishing baths (Khodja, 1982, p. 204), pulling down house pillars, destroying gardens, damaging water pipes and irrigation channels, and showing no respect for cleanliness (Azan, 1929, p. 20).

Clauzel was appointed head of the French army on 2 September 1830, succeeding Débormont. He is considered one of the most enthusiastic French officers regarding the policy of colonialism and European settlement in Algeria (Bouaziz, *Colonial Domination Policy and the Algerian National Movement 1830-1954*, 2007, p. 7). In order to implement his settlement project, he chose the centre of the colony as an experimental model for settlement, preferring it to Annaba and Oran because success was guaranteed by the presence of the fertile and magnificent M'tidja plain, which he believed could attract settlers. It was thus that this plain became the target of his agricultural and settlement projects, where he hoped to see it populated by millions of Europeans within a few years. Clauzel favoured this plain over other plains in Algeria for several reasons: its central position in the colony; its proximity to the French administrative centres and the port, which made it easy to transport, distribute and purchase colonial goods; and it was considered safer and less expensive than Annaba at the time (Dupuy, 1831, p. 25).

At the northern entrance to the plain, near the Wadi al-Karma and El-Harrach, a model farm was set up, known as the "model farm", on the site of Hassan Pasha's farm, not far from Casablanca. It covers an area of 1,000 hectares, cultivated and guarded by a group of colonists recruited into the French army, who pay one franc per hectare per year for a period of 9 to 18 years. Land grants in this farm were exclusively reserved for colonists with French citizenship (Husseini, 2013, p. 51).

The farm was attacked by Algerian resistance forces led by Ibn Za'moum and Sidi al-Sa'di, resulting in its burning and the killing of the farmers, while the survivors fled to the capital. As a result, they were unable to harvest their first crop (Démontés, pp. 123-124).

After General Faure was appointed commander of the occupation army, he concentrated his policy on (Narcisse, 1889, p. 630):

- Trying to control the security situation in the plain.
- Relying on the Arab Bureau for communication and relations with the local population.
- Builds roads and begins to drain the marshes.
- Concentrate on agricultural production, particularly fodder crops.
- Helping Europeans to acquire property in the M'tidja plain and providing protection for them.

Clauzel proposed the establishment of a settlement to experiment with crops, called the 'model farm', which would serve as the first nucleus for extensive settlement on the M'tidja plain. This would compensate France for agricultural products from America and India, and Algeria would thus become a refuge for the French population and an important resource for its trade and industry, attracting the attention of all Europeans (Dupuy, 1831, p. 25). Alexis de Tocqueville stated: "Algiers is the centre of our power in Africa. We need agricultural settlers in this place, because it provides markets for agricultural products, and thus attracts and retains settlers more effectively... Here we can assert our ability to colonise Africa" (de Tocqueville, 2008, pp. 65-66).

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In addition to securing the plain, Faure planned to open a network of roads linking the capital to the M'tidja plain and the main towns, thus paving the way for the expansion of settlement and the occupation of Blida and El-Qal'a. He began with the Metidja road to Blida via Dali Ibrahim and El-Douira, reaching Ouled Mendil between June and 7 August 1833 (Husseini, 2013, p. 69). Alexis de Tocqueville remarked: "If we really want to settle the M'tidja, we must take care of this matter without delay, not perhaps to make these trivial lands covered with swamps arable, but to make the more fertile neighbouring lands habitable and healthier" (de Tocqueville, 2008, p. 68).

The African Committee (1833-1834) supported the idea of occupying the plain, recommending in its final report that it should be defended by military occupation of the capital, the coast and Blida, due to its agricultural importance. It also emphasised the need to drain the swamps of the plain and favoured small farmers over capitalist colonisation (Husseini, 2013, pp. 75-76).

This period also saw the resumption of the resistance led by Emir Abdelkader (1830-1847), which targeted the settlers' installations in the Metidja plain. Consequently, the following years would serve as years of reprisals against the inhabitants of the plain based on their participation in the resistance against the Emir, resulting in the confiscation of more of their lands, which were later granted to European colonists (Husseini, 2013, p. 79). In this regard, Alexis de Tocqueville stated: "The greater part of the M'tidja plain belongs to Arab tribes who are today, willingly or unwillingly, on the side of Abdelkader. The administration must become the master of these lands, which will not be returned even in peace. The tribes that held them fought against us; their lands can be confiscated... It is a harsh law that must be applied in this case if necessary" (de Tocqueville, 2008, p. 69).

After Valée's appointment as governor-general of Algeria in 1837, and despite the problems of official settlement in Boufarik, he supported this type of settlement, with the approval of the Minister of War, and sought land for the creation of new urban centres in the plain. Thus, in 1839, large centres were established in the large enclosures of Souk Ahl, Bou Yaakoub, Mimouche, Boujoura and Ben Nwar El-Louz, using the same method as for the construction of the towns of Clauzel and Boufarik. Each centre was settled by between 20 and 40 families, and a total of 316 families were settled in these new centres, comprising about 1,500 people (Narcisse, 1889, p. 617).

The pace of the resistance in the plain increased due to the misbehaviour of the settlers. In 1839, the inhabitants of the plain joined Emir Abdelkader's resistance against the Europeans. In response, the colonial authorities rushed to secure the eastern and western sides of the plain, as well as supporting settlement efforts and granting more land to newcomers. To facilitate this, a land survey office was established, which played an important role in determining the lands of the Beylik (Husseini, 2013, p. 96).

4. Property determination and its role in establishing European ownership in the plain:

After General Bugeaud was appointed Governor-General of Algeria, he declared on 22 February 1841 that he would be an enthusiastic coloniser and adopted what was known as the "policy of the musket and the plough". He considered it foolish to persecute the Algerians without seizing their agricultural lands and declared: "We must settle the colonists wherever we find fertile land and abundant, suitable water, without trying to identify the owners" (Adouné, 1927, p. 206). He revealed his settlement plan by saying: "There is no better means than the confiscation of agricultural land; the sole purpose of the war is colonisation, and occupation without agricultural exploitation will be fruitless. The mission of the French army is not limited to chasing the Arabs, as that will not be useful, but rather to preventing them from cultivating their land" (Ben Daha, 2008, pp. 311-313).

On this basis, General Bugeaud worked diligently to draft legal texts that would serve the French presence and facilitate the confiscation of property from Algerians, without forgetting the previous measures initiated by his predecessor, General Valée. Once the situation in the Algiers region and the M'tidja plain had

calmed down somewhat, the colonial administration issued a long list of names of inhabitants whose property was to be confiscated under the decree of 1 December 1840. This decree provided for the confiscation of land belonging to Algerians who had been involved in hostile acts against the colonial authorities or their allies among the Algerian tribes, and who had emigrated and abandoned their lands. The number of Algerians whose property was confiscated between 1840 and 1842 was approximately 1,132. In addition, 11 orange plantations were put up for auction. Between 1840 and 1845, the establishment of military centres along the coast and in the M'tidja plain began, and the number of settlements increased, reaching about 28 settlements in the M'tidja and coastal areas in 1844. The number of Europeans during Bugeaud's tenure reached 100,000 immigrants, an increase of 42% compared to 1839 (Husseini, 2013, p. 203).

After the appointment of Duke D'Aumale as Governor-General of Algeria, in succession to General Bugeaud, he set about identifying the lands in the Metidja plain and determining their true owners. By 30 June 1847, the committee had dealt with 51 properties covering an area of 15,000 hectares. The topographical services of the Algiers Directorate completed land survey plans for 78,000 hectares of the plain between the sea and the left side of the Algiers-Blida road, and between the Algiers-Blida road and the right side of the Chiffa river, covering an estimated area of 30,000 hectares (Julien, 2007, p. 504).

5. Implementation of the Sénatus Consult of 22 April 1863 in the M'tidja plain and its surroundings:

On 16 April 1864, it was announced that committees would be set up to survey 15 administrative districts for the implementation of the Sénatus Consult law. On 22 March 1865, the decision was approved for application to 124 tribes in Algeria because of the urgent need for land to facilitate settlement. The areas around the Metidja plain were included: Khachna of the plain and Zemoul, under the Dellys Committee; Beni Khalifa, under the Tizi Ouzou Committee; and areas under the Cherchell Committee in Beni Menad, Beni Mansour in El-Sharaqa, Beni Mansour in Ghraba and Gouraya. The first two paragraphs of article 2 of the Sénatus Consult law of 22 April 1863 were applied in all the areas of the plain and the surrounding regions on the basis of the first, second

and third chapters of the supplementary decision of 23 May 1863 (B, 1865, p. 152).

The committees responsible for implementing the decision worked diligently and their results were reflected in the decree issued on 28 April 1866. To facilitate the work of the committee, Khachna was divided into two districts: Khachna Civil, which was administratively attached to Algiers, and Khachna Military, which was part of the Dellys district. The same division was applied to Khachna in the plain, creating both Khachna Civil and Khachna Military. As a result, two committees were established to implement the Sénatus Consult law of 1863 in this area: one linked to Algiers for the Khachna Civil area and another for Khachna Military under the Dellys committee (Husseini, 2013, p. 364).

The committees also worked on the lands of Khachna Military, which belonged to the district of Algiers and had been annexed to the civil lands based on the decree of 21 May 1856. Then, on 16 August 1859, it was annexed to the civil lands of the Hotel commune and, on 22 August 1861, to Boudaou, thus becoming known as Khachna Civil. The law of Sénatus Consult was applied to it by the district committee of Algiers, which demarcated its territory together with the western territory of Yesser and estimated its total area at 17,383 hectares, with 4,177 Algerian inhabitants (B O. G., 1866, pp. 310-315).

On 23 September 1867, the areas of Khachna Civil and Military were demarcated, with a population of 5,844 and a total area of 25,216 hectares, of which only a small part, estimated at 2,291 hectares, was arable. It was proposed to divide Khachna Military into two districts (Husseini, 2013, p. 366):

- **Douar Arbaatach:** with a population of 1,969 and an area of 13,501 hectares.
- **Douar Bouzguza:** with a population of 2,875 and an area of 11,715 hectares, making a total of 5,844 inhabitants and 25,216 hectares.

Most of the plain became the property of the colonisers, who gave it to settlers in small plots. However, these settlers often showed little interest in cultivating the land, and many near the city of Algiers were nothing more than pseudo-settlers and real speculators. They were given land to sell later at ten times the original price, causing land prices around Algiers to rise significantly each year (Maltzan, 2009, pp. 138-139).

6. The impact of the policy of land confiscation on the inhabitants of the plain:

As a result of the brutal French economic policies, the living conditions of the local population deteriorated severely. Widespread poverty ensued, and the community began to face periodic epidemics and famines, such as the one that peaked in 1867, which is considered the greatest humanitarian disaster Algeria has faced in modern times (Bourguida, 2008, p. 368). The indigenous population suffered greatly and their numbers dwindled. The country experienced drought, lack of rain and locust invasions. To pay taxes, farmers were forced to sell their livestock, and the summer of 1867 was marked by famine, malnutrition and the spread of epidemics such as cholera in the autumn of 1866-1867, followed by plague and fever in the spring of 1867. The administration herded people into fields and camps and forced farmers to empty their granaries, which had been their reserves before the years of drought and hardship (Bernian, 1984, p. 342).

Charles Lavigerie described these horrific scenes, stating: “For several months the Arabs have found nothing to eat except the herbs in the fields or the leaves of the trees, on which they graze like animals. Now, with the severity of autumn, their bodies have weakened and they have died of hunger. Naked and tattered, they wander aimlessly through the streets and towns from which they have been driven, afraid of the chaos they might cause. They wait to scavenge rubbish and leftovers, with nothing to take back, digging in the ground for food from dead animals. They raid the livestock of the settlers who guard their fields with guns, and most tragically, many die in the fields, their bodies scattered each morning” (Bernian, 1984, p. 341).

Signs of poverty were widespread, including the proliferation of huts made of branches, stones and mud bricks with straw, reed or thatch roofs. The rural community was devastated and farmers could no longer live off their harvests (Kaddash, 2008, p. 229).

There was an increase in suicide, theft and various crimes (Qalil, 2008-2009, p. 61). Many people preferred to commit crimes in order to get into prison, seeking a way to survive. Gober emphasised this when he said: “There are whole tribes of destitute people who have nothing left; they survive on prickly pear fruit as long as it is available, and after that they have no other means of subsistence than theft” (Ageroun, 2007, p. 385). As they crowded the streets and public

squares in search of food from rubbish dumps and heaps of garbage, the Europeans shouted for the ruling authorities to expel them, claiming that they were a threat to public safety and health (Bouaziz, *The Struggle of the Algerians through Documents*, 1986, p. 166).

Some poignant testimonies by French observers of the suffering of the Algerians during this period include “All that has been written about the indescribable misery does not come close to the truth... Can we look on indifferently at these wretched souls dying of hunger on our doorstep, competing with dogs for the rubbish of the street? (Kaddash and Sari, *Algeria: Resilience and Resistance 1830-1962*, 2012).

Due to the severe impact of the famines on the Algerian psyche, these events remained etched in their memories and were often cited as historical markers associated with certain years, such as the reference to 1860 as “the year of the locusts” and 1867-1868 as “the year of drought” or “the year of evil” (Ben Daha, 2008, pp. 17-19).

As a result of this catastrophic situation, the population decreased dramatically during this period and the tribal composition was disrupted. In several centres of the M’tidja plain, including Mouzaïa, Hajout, Ouled Alayek, Ouled Yaïch Sidi Moussa, Hamra Ain and Blida, 1,533 deaths were recorded as a result of the famine in 1867 and 1868, representing 12.61% of the total deaths registered during the famine. In addition, 27 deaths were recorded in the Bougarra area in 1867. In the town of Blida alone, 480 deaths were recorded in 1867. In the four years from 1866 to 1871, a total of 1,700 deaths were recorded, not to mention the displaced people who fled from the rural areas of M’tidja and beyond to the centre of Blida to escape famine and epidemics. Most of them met their end in the public square of Blida, where volunteers and municipal workers undertook to bury them, without conducting accurate statistics or identifying the majority of their origins (Husseini, 2013, p. 433).

The towns of El-Qal’a and the coastal areas were also badly affected by the disaster, more so than Blida. In 1868, 365 deaths were recorded in El-Qal’a, while 690 deaths were reported in Zeralda, Tipaza, El-Douira, El-Chareka and Mahallama, including 399 cases in El-Douira alone in the same year. In addition, 1,758 deaths were recorded between 1866 and 1871 among the inhabitants of El-Qal’a and the surrounding areas who had fled to the city

because of famine and disease. The mortality rate in the coastal areas was estimated at 20% of the total deaths recorded during this famine (Husseini, 2013, p. 434).

The mayor of Sidi Moussa reported to the Lehon Commission that the number of victims was 217,812 and that even livestock had not been spared (Mokhtari, 2015-2016, p. 107). The Bishop of Algiers estimated that the number of dead in the Algiers region had reached 100,000, with 19,000 dying in just two months (Bouaziz, *The Struggle of the Algerians through Documents*, 1986, p. 167).

In several of his letters, Dr Vital described the suffering of the Algerians. In a letter dated 9 July 1867, he wrote: “Only sad scenes remain before our eyes: thirst, hunger, misery and disease, as the people die en masse from cholera and the plagues of famine” (Bouaziz, **The Struggle of the Algerians through Documents**, 1986, p. 164).

In addition, Mahfoud Kaddash recounts the testimony of some French observers on this situation: “This was the fate of these wretched Arab inhabitants. Look at their faces, disfigured by the terrible ravages of famine. Look at the bodies, grotesquely resembling human skeletons, and count the agonies of the long dying that each of these starving individuals experienced in his last days”. He added: “We saw the wretched, veritable walking skeletons, linger for fourteen days before they died. What horrible and terrible scenes!” (Kaddash and Sari, *Algeria: Resilience and Resistance 1830-1962*, 2012, pp. 228-229).

One is left perplexed, wondering about the cause of the deadly famine that struck Algerian society, especially since Algeria was once known as the “granary of Rome” during the Roman era, producing a variety of grains sufficient to feed its human and animal population. According to contemporary European accounts, the surplus was exported to southern France and Italy to save the inhabitants from devastating famines. The answer to this question lies in the orchestrated operations that allowed European scoundrels to seize the richest lands in the world and redirect them to serve the French economy at the expense of the Algerian people, which was one of the main reasons for the deterioration of conditions (Zoubiri, 1984, p. 40).

The great Algerian families, which represented the spiritual, material, administrative and social leadership of Algerian society, were destroyed. The

Algerian community was torn apart, displaced and impoverished. The Algerian bourgeoisie, made up of merchants, artisans, judges and intellectuals, was also devastated, displaced and driven out of its businesses and various activities by the European community, which was characterised by economic greed and harshness and cruelty in politics and administration (Bouaziz, *Colonial Domination and the Algerian National Movement 1830-1954, 2007, p. 35).

Referring to this situation, Jean-Paul Sartre said: “They wanted to humiliate them and destroy their dignity, reducing them to the status of animals, leaving bodies to live without the spirits that would be killed. Oppression, taming and punishment are the words that dominate the coloniser’s mind. There is no longer enough room in Algeria for two types of man; one must choose between them” (Sartre, 2007, p. 72).

Conclusion:

After examining this issue from various angles, we have reached several conclusions, which can be summarised as follows:

- After launching its campaign against Algeria in 1830, France began to implement its settlement project, which depended on the fulfilment of a number of conditions, including the provision of land and its colonisation by European settlers. This could only be achieved by emptying the country of its inhabitants and seizing their land by various means. In this way, France succeeded in annexing many properties belonging to the Algerian people to the French administration.
- The first attempts to seize land were made in the areas surrounding the capital, particularly along the coast and in the M’tidja plain, which served as a testing ground for French colonial experiments that would later be applied in various fields throughout Algeria. These included both human and material aspects, fundamentally linked to the extent of Algerians’ interaction with, and susceptibility to, Europeans. This was evident in the first experiments carried out in the Boufarik area and in testing their reactions to land expropriation. However, the first ten years of the occupation showed the Europeans that they could never overlook the possibilities offered by the Algerians to seize their land, since, contrary to their previous beliefs, there was no such thing as vacant land.

- The process of land expropriation had a significant impact on the population of the plain, since many people whose property was confiscated migrated internally, joining the ranks of the resistance or moving to the interior regions, in addition to external migration. This situation also affected those who remained, who over time became seasonal workers and sharecroppers for the colonisers after the confiscation of the lands they had traditionally cultivated. Many settlers preferred to employ Algerians for agricultural work in the plains because of their experience with the land, their adaptability to the climate and the lower cost of Algerian labour compared to European workers.

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