

## **The French Colonial Expansion and Battles in the Algerian Sahara, the Case of Zousfana, Bechar, and Saoura Regions, (1889-1903)**

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### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this article is to trace the process through which the French could occupy the south-western Saharan territories in Algeria namely Zousfana, Bechar, and the Ksours of the Saoura. It gives details of the battles that the autochthons fought against the French troops to preserve their independence. Such objectives could be attained through a historical research methodology by the study of documents written by French officers and campaigners. The occupation of the aforementioned Saharan territories was strategic for the realisation of France's project of occupying North Africa and the construction of the trans-Saharan railways that would bring together its West African colonies. This step had the effect of isolating Morocco and weakening its economy by stopping the trans-Saharan trade. However, the resistance of the autochthons and the hard-climatic conditions made it difficult for the French army to dominate and maintain a strong presence in the Sahara. All along its occupation, the French presence remained military that is why it could never rally the Saharan populations nor assimilate them.

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### Introduction

The French colonial expansion in the southern territories of Oran was conducted to suppress Emir Abdel Kader's resistance in the 1840's and Sheik Bouamama's revolt and struggle in the 1880s. Within the agreement in the Treaty of Tanger 1844, which was signed after the battle of Isly, between the French Government headed by Nicolas Jean-de-Dieu Soult (1840-1847) under the reign of Louis Philippe I and Sultan Moulay Abdurrahman (1822-1859), the borders were set between Figuig and Djenane El Dar. *Article 1* of the Lalla-Maghnia Convention in (1844) stipulated that the Caid of Oujda had to limit the Moroccan troops to 2000 soldiers. While in *Article 2* the signatories agreed that the French had the right to inflict severe punishment on the Caids that tolerated or directed aggressions on the French interests, *Article 4* determined the status of Emir Abd-el-Kader as being an outlaw that had to be chased by both the Moroccan and the French military troops until his elimination (Rouard De Gard, 1906, p. 10). From the 1880s, the limit of the French military operations was Djenien Bourezg where they defeated Sheikh Bouamama. Since then, the borders with Morocco from Port-Say on the Mediterranean to Djenane Ed Dar in the South were secured by treaty and military presence.

The French authorities became more interested in the Algerian south-western territories bordering the Kingdom of Morocco namely the Zousfana Valley, Bechar, and the Ksours<sup>1</sup> of the Saoura when it was proved to be impossible to realise a trans-Saharan railway through the Tuareg territories on the itinerary set by the Foureau-Lamy expedition. Hence, the study of the process of the French occupation of the aforementioned territories is very important to reveal the details of such enterprise that determined the fate of the local populations and caused great events that shaped the future of region. This means that this article aims at determining the conditions in which France undertook the occupation, the measures and means it took to maintain its presence in the ksours and oases, and the resistance of the local population to the invasion. This work is limited to the study of the French occupation of the Zousfana Valley, Bechar, and the Saoura territories through the French government's trans-Saharan railway project with special consideration to the resistance of the autochthons to the French invasion by exposing the famous battles that they fought for their land, lives, and properties.

### 1. The Trans-Saharan Railway Project and the French Expansion in the Algerian South-Western Territories

The initial objective of extending the railways from Oran to Djenien Bourezg was to transport the military troops rapidly and without great efforts to the places where their intervention was necessary along the borders with Morocco. It was the occupation of Touat that revived the French pending project expanding the railways beyond Djenien Bourezg to those newly occupied territories southwards to the Guir Valley (Gautier Émile-Félix, 1903, 241-242). The project was the best means to prevent the Moroccans from installing in the Zousfana valley or the Saoura. In addition, the Djenien Bourezg terminus did not offer abundant water resources, which obliged the authorities to extend the rails to the valley of Oued Dermal.

In August 1899, the Moroccans manifested their interest in the valley by constructing edifices on the way that the railways would take, which pushed the French to prepare a three-step plan for an eventual intervention. It included the organisation of a military column to be ready to march on Djenien bou Rezg, sending emissaries to Tafilalet to collect intelligence, and undertaking the reconnaissance of the Oued Zoubia and the Zousfana valley (Émile-Félix Gautier, 1903, 236). The fact that the railways were prolonged from the valley of Oued Dermal to Oued Zoubia obliged the

government to decide on the occupation of the region to defend the French interests and stop the Moroccan machinations.

After the reconnaissance of the aforementioned region, General Saint-Germain, who was the Engineer in Chief of the Civil Works Administration and in charge of the construction of the railways, proposed to build a redoubt at Oued Zoubia occupied by two infantry brigades, one Spahis Squad, and Goums, and another at Hadjerat El Mguil where one infantry brigade and a Spahis detachment would be installed. He proposed also to raise military troops in Oran, Saida, and Ain Sefra to be ready to intervene if the concerned regions were menaced, and a column to accompany the workers in the working sites. These propositions were submitted to the Minister of War Gaston de Galliffet that elaborated a project jointly with Governor General of Algeria Laferriere on January 1900. On February, Laferriere ordered the execution of the terrain studies for the railways beyond Oued Zoubia, which was renamed Duveyrier, to Ksar El Azoudj. The occupation of Hadjerat el Mguil by a column composed of the cavaliers' company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion, half Spahis squad, and 20 Goums that came from Djenien Bourezg, gave the start signal for the operations was necessary to provide protection for the railway building sites.

Although General Grisot expressed reservations as to the application of the Governor's instructions, he admitted that the quicker the concerned regions were subdued and the railway line was to be constructed, the less problems would rise from the Moroccans and other Saharan Tribes. Therefore, he reconsidered the initial plan taking into consideration the Governor's propositions. The final plan provided for the organisation of the following garrisons:

- The column for protection comprised 2 companies from the 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion, half Spahis squad, and Goums.
- Oued Zoubia Garrison: Three (3) Companies from the 1<sup>st</sup> African Hunters, half Spahis squad, goums.
- Hadjerat El Mguil Garrison: One (1) company of cavaliers from the 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion.
- Djenien Bourezg Garrison: One (1) company from the 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion, half Spahis squad, and Goums.
- Ain Sefra Garrison: Two (2) companies from 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion, one (1) squadron from the *Chasseurs d'Afrique*.
- Rescue column in Ain Sefra: One (1) battalion for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, one (1) squadron from the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Chasseurs d'Afrique*, one (1) artillery section, Goums, and one convoy loading supplies for 10 days.
- Reserve column in Oran: One (1) battalion form the 2<sup>nd</sup> Zouaves, one (1) squadron from the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Chasseurs d'Afrique*, one (1) artillery section.

The Minister of War approved all the above propositions on February 1, 1900, and on the 7<sup>th</sup>, the troops started the execution of the orders. Under the command of Major Brundsaux, the protection column was the first to move southwards with the task of accompanying the engineers. It arrived at Oued Zoubia garrison on February 10, where the authorities intended to build a redoubt, but rapidly abandoned the project because of the lack of financial means. Instead, a project of building a large and fortified railway station by the civil works enough to host 150 men was favourably adopted (Tillion, 1903, p. 71).

The objective of the protection column, later called the *Zousfana Column*, was not just to provide security to the construction of the railway sites, but also to participate in the conquest of Touat through the Saoura by meeting the *In Salah Column* that was approved on February 9, 1900. There

were two propositions to realise the occupation of the Touat and the Saoura regions with one military operation. In the first proposition, it was recommended that both columns had the objective to meet at Tamentit and conquer the territories in their passage. Once the mission was successfully undertaken and the strategic points occupied, the surplus of the columns would return through the Zousfana valley. In the second proposition, it was recommended that the *In Salah* Column marched through the Gourara and the Touat to meet the Zousfana Column at Igli. However, General Grisot, the Commanding Chief of the 19<sup>th</sup> Corps in Algeria, responded negatively to these propositions because of the weak constitution of the two columns and the approaching hot summer season.

In the meantime, Governor General Laferriere informed General Grisot that the government would authorise the march of the Protection Column if he did not oppose it. Grisot approved the march of the Zousfana Column towards Igli on the condition to enforce it with about 300 rifles. This condition emanated from the information that Berbers (Berabers in local dialect) of Tafilalet were much hostile to what was happening in the region, which had been under their influence for a long time. The Minister of War Gaston de Galiffette was more favourable to the proposition of General Grisot and gave the instruction that the Protection Column would not go beyond Ksar el Adjouz, which could be changed only by the government. Therefore, the Protection Column left Oued Zoubia garrison on February 20, 1900, and successively arrived at Oued El Hassi, Djenan El Dar, Nakhlat Bel Brahim, and on March 13, it stopped at Ksar El Adjouz.

It is worth noting that Governor General Laferriere played an important role in the conquest of the Saoura since he constantly and insistently advocated the necessity of occupying the region to stop the Moroccan influence along the western borders. On March 5, he proposed to General Grisot to occupy Igli. Grisot declared to the government that such operation was possible if a column in this period was constituted with 1500 men with a convoy of water and supplies and troops for protection. This opinion was decisive in the government's decision to approve the proposition. Two days later, the Minister of War Galliffet gave the order to constitute the Igli Column and the Observation Column to be stationed near Figuig for observation.

The purpose of creating the Igli Column was to relieve the In Salah Column for the time being from moving northwards in summer, which could be done in the next autumn while Igli was already occupied. The Igli Column was given the following directives: to March rapidly towards Igli and occupy it without resorting to military force if possible. The role of the Observation Column was to keep an eye on the population of Figuig and keep the region under check without provoking incidents. The Igli column included 52 officers and 1.826 men, supplies for 30 days, water for 3 days, and 2800 camels. The general staff was commanded by Colonel Bertrand of the 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion, his first lieutenant Major Barthai from Oran Division, one quartermaster, one artillery commander, one military engineering commander, two officers from the indigenous affairs, two interpreters, one payment agent, and one veterinary. The troops were composed of: (Tillion 1903, p.75)

- One battalion from the 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion commanded by Major Brundsaux
- One battalion from the 2<sup>nd</sup> infantry commanded by major Exelmans
- Half squadron of 2<sup>nd</sup> Spahis
- Half squadron of 2<sup>nd</sup> *Chasseurs d'Afrique*
- One mountain section with 918 cannon shells of which 206 Melinite charges.
- One military engineering detachment composed of 30 men commanded by an officer.
- One ambulance and nurse detachment
- One detachment of administration agents
- 50 Goums cavaliers



On the other hand, the Observation Column at Figuig, commanded by Major Ducroiset the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> *Battalion d'Afrique*, was composed of two companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> *Battalion d'Afrique*, half squadron of the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Chasseur d'Afrique*, and twenty-five Goum cavaliers. The uncertainty as regards the attitudes of the local tribes pushed the authorities to reinforce it by the mounted company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion from Geryville. The adoption of these last propositions created changes in the initial plan. The protection column of the study mission was replaced by a small escort of half company from the 1<sup>st</sup> *Battalion d'Afrique* and a group of Goums. The movement of the troops was as follows:

- One company moved from Kreider to Zoubia garrison to replace the two companies assigned to the observation column.
- A company of Zouaves from Ain Sefra was sent to Djenien BouRezg.
- Half of a company of the 1<sup>st</sup> *Battalion d'Afrique* of Djenien replaced the mounted company from the 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion at Hadjirat El Mguil, which was included in the composition of the Igli Column.
- One battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Zouaves from Oran, one mountain section of Oran, and one squadron from the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Chasseurs d'Afrique* of Mecheria were ordered to move southwards in order to reconstitute the rescue column of Ain Sefra, which provided the essential elements to constitute the Igli Column.

The instructions were clear to the Observation Column and the Igli Column to avoid contact with the populations mainly that of Figuig and to occupy the Zousfana valley pacifically. While the two columns were being formed, the military authorities were informed that the Berabers, the Doui Menia, and the Beni Guil made peace and decided to conduct consorted attacks on the French troops in the region of Beni Goumi. Therefore, General Grisot ordered the union of the two columns at Oued Zoubia garrison before heading southwards towards the Zousfana valley. Orders were given to the Protection Column of the Study Commission commanded by Major Brundsaux to return to Djenan El Dar and wait for the other columns. On March 24, 1900, the two constituted columns started their journey towards Igli through the Zousfana. While the column of Major Ducroiset halted at Djenan El Dar to build an observation post to keep an eye on Figuig, the other column commanded by Colonel Bertrand entered the Zousfana valley.

Rumours reached Colonel Bertrand on march 28, that the Doui Menia were preparing for an attack on the convoy at Beni Goumi, which was confirmed by the attitude of population of Taghit that was hostile to the presence of the convoy on April 1, 1900. Faithful to the instruction of the authorities not to engage in armed conflicts, the Colonel first ordered the Mountain Section to be ready to engage in battle, and sent one infantry company to outflank the ksar of Taghit from the right while the Goums headed towards it. He sent an emissary to the *Djemaa* (assembly of elders and influential people) of Taghit warning them that any attempt to attack the column would have adverse consequences. Therefore, the column passed at the ramparts of the Ksar without being disturbed by the armed guards that had had the authority to collect passage taxes from the travellers who were obliged to cross the Taghit defile.

This was the only incident that the column experienced until it arrived at Igli on April 5, 1900. When the column was at four kilometres from Igli ksar, which is situated at the confluence of Oued Guir and Oued Zousfana, the *Djemaa* came to meet Colonel Bertrand expressing their cordial intentions, and asked him to establish the camp far from the ksar so as not to frighten the population. The next day, in a meeting with the Caid of Igli at the camp, Colonel Bertrand proposed to him to keep his status, but the Caid disdained the offer under the pretext that he was assigned by the Sultan of Morocco Moulay Abdel Aziz (1894-1908). The column was instructed to stay at Igli until

Colonel Menestrel, who commended the In Salah Column, terminated the operations he was assigned to accomplish in the Touat.

Colonel Bertrand was obliged to prolong his stay in Igli because of the insecurity that prevailed in the Saoura and the menace of an attack on the French posts by the Berabers and the Doui Menia. It became necessary to install permanent garrisons with adequate number of troops. Therefore, Colonel Bertrand decided to move the camp about six kilometres from Igli where Oued Zousfana and Oued Guir joined, specifically on a spot that culminated the two valleys. The camp was built in the form of a redoubt composed of three level tablelands and surrounded by a wall of stones.

The French presence in Zousfana and Igli had a great impact on the political organisation of the region. Before the coming of the French, this region had been ruled by brigands and tribes that in the name of the Moroccan Sultan resorted to razzias raiding the ksours of the Saoura for food supplies or stealing their animals, or in some cases to punish the tribes and ksour that angered the Moroccan sultan and his vassals (. The Berabers, the Doui Menia, the Oulad Djerir, and the Chaamba used to tyrannise the ksour of the Saoura by taking tributes or plundering their resources, or they would pay of their lives. For the ksour populations, the coming of the French was just the entering of a new player that intended to dominate and exploit them. However, the French military presence revealed itself as beneficial since the policing activities of the French troops nearly stopped the razzias of the surrounding tribes on the ksour.

Captain Flye Sainte-Marie reported in his book *Dans l'Ouest de la Saoura* (1905) that razzias were perpetrated in the region from Zousfana to Oued Guir and even beyond to the Sakiat El Hamra either to get spoils or to recuperate the stolen herds. It was reported that some years ago the Tadjakant were stripped of their possessions by the Reguibat and were obliged to leave the Iguidi region to find shelter in the Draa River region. In turn, three successive razzias mostly composed of Doui Menia robbed the majority of the herds of the Reguibats (Flye, 1905, p.99). The most recent razzias happened in the spring of 1903 as reported to Captain Flye by Mohammed BelHadj Salemi. The latter said that the Reguibat occupied nearly all wells of the region, which would have angered the other tribes. A razzias of seventy warriors from Doui Menia and Chaamba attacked the Reguibat and robbed everything they possessed including 1000 camels.

On the one hand, the ksour and the weak tribes found in the French military presence a protection since they could no longer be attacked nor asked to pay tributes to the plunderers, or pay taxes to the Moroccan authorities. On the other, the strong tribes that resorted to razzias saw in the French presence a nuisance since they were deprived of an easy and abundant source of food and animal supplies. In different occasions, such tribes tried to create an alliance to face their common enemy, the French troops, but their ancestral rivalries prevented them from constituting a united front. Frequently, small groups from the mentioned tribes attempted to perpetrate thefts of animals and attacks on the French convoys in guerrilla warfare but these events were insignificant and were considered as bandit activities that plagued the region, which was one of the most outstanding characteristics of the Sahara from ancient times (Tillion, 1903, p.100).

It is clear that the French authorities intended to occupy the south west of Algeria by means of a strong military presence to impose their will on the local tribes, and use peaceful means to dominate them through commercial activities and friendly relations. Governor General Laferriere instructed the military authorities to adopt peaceful means and attitudes vis-à-vis the local populations, and prescribed the use firearms only as the last resort and only for defensive reasons. In addition, the established administration did not have to pursue the total submission of the Doui

Menia and Ouled Djerir tribes, nor obliging them to pay taxes. Instead, such administration had to attempt to tie up close and friendly relations with them. It is clear that Governor Laferriere feared the rebellion of the two tribes and did not want any direct confrontation with them that would lead to unnecessary bloodshed. This does not mean that he did not seek the submission of the two tribes, but it was just too early to realise. The strategy of the Governor was to isolate the region of Oued Guir and Bechar from all support from the Berabers and the Moroccan authorities in the north by occupying the Zousfana valley, and occupying the Touat and Gourara to prevent the ksour from providing help from the south.

The French were very cautious with the populations that politically swore allegiance to the Moroccan Sultan because it was unnecessary to fight them for a land that was worth nothing in a time where the French forces were not strong enough to engage in an overwhelming war to submit territories two or three times larger than France. In the time being, the French forces did not have to organise the mentioned territories administratively but remained on the defensive. This meant that the French had to invest in supplying the scattered garrisons to maintain their presence durably in the three regions namely Saoura, Gourara, and Touat.

## 2. The Occupation of the Zousfana Valley and Bechar and the Maintaining of the Supply Convoys

Once the Igli Column set off, it was necessary for the French authorities to organise the supplies for its survival and success. Three supply convoys were organised to maintain the redoubts and the installed troops in Igli. The supplies had to be sufficient for a period of six months, which obliged the authorities to organise large convoys escorted by significant military columns to secure their passage. It was planned that the two columns would exchange the camels so that the Djenane Ed Dar Column would return back with the tired camels of the Igli Column. During the period between March and December of 1900, supply convoys and troops crossed the Zousfana Valley without interruption giving the impression that the French were on the warpath. The delivery of the supplies was undertaken in two stages. The convoy setting off from the north with the supplies had to stop at Taghit waiting for the convoy coming from Igli to deliver the supplies.

The first supply convoy started from Ain Sefra on March 29, 1900, loading provisions for about forty days on 2447 camels. It was escorted by one Zouave battalion and one and half squadron of the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Chasseurs d'Afrique* under the command of Major Bulharowski. The escort was reinforced by two companies from the African Hunters at Oued Zoubia garrison and the battalion at Djenane Ed Dar of the threats that the Beraber tribes presented on the convoys. Conducted by Captain Boule of the Indigenous Affairs helped by forty-five Goums, the convoy arrived at Zaouia Foukania of Taghit on April 11, 1900, where Major Bulharowski met Major Brundsaux coming in a convoy from Igli to receive the supplies (Tillion 1903, p. 83). Once the supplies were delivered, Major Bulharowski returned back to Djenane Ed- Dar that he reached on April 18 with 400 tired camels.

The second supply convoy was organised to load supplies for sixty days gathered in Ain Sefra and Djenien Bourezg. This convoy was escorted by three companies from the 1<sup>st</sup> African Hunters, two companies from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry stationed at Djenane Ed Dar and Oued Zoubia, half Squadron of the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Chasseurs d'Afrique* from Ain Sefra, one squad of 2<sup>nd</sup> Spahis from Oued Zoubia garrison, and twenty-five Goums under the command of Major Ducroiset. The convoy, which was composed of 3136 camels, thirty-one oxen, and 1300 sheep started its journey southwards on April 23, 1900, from Djenane Ed Dar (Tillion 1903, p. 84). Seven days later, it reached El Morra area in Taghit where Major Exelmans came from Igli to receive the supplies. When Major Ducroiset's convoy

arrived at Djenane Ed Dar on May 4, he had already lost 160 camels most of them from the tired ones of the Igli Column. Although there were rumours that the convoy would be attacked by the Berabers and the Oulad Djerir, it travelled without being disturbed.

The occupation of the Zousfana Valley and the Saoura region was very embarrassing for the Moroccan Government, also known as the Mekhzen.<sup>2</sup> The territory was once under the influence of the Moroccan appointed Caids, and the populations solicited the Cadi (judge) of Fez to settle their differences. It was reported by A. Le Chatelier in his book *Notes sur les Villes et Tribus du Maroc en 1890* that the Doui Menia of Fez were in many occasions used by the Cadi of Fez to collect taxes and to punish those recalcitrant tribes or villages that did not pay their dues (Le Chatelier, 1902, p.53). In addition, Abdel Ouahab Ben Mansour explains in his book *The Tribes of the Maghreb* (1968) that the French infringed the treaty of May 7, 1902, by putting the Moroccan tribes of Doui Menia and Ouled Djerir under their control, and annexing the whole region of Bechar (Ben Mansour 1968, p. 226).

The Moroccans started to gather forces and build small forts on the borders from Figuig northwards, which obliged the French to think of occupying further territories like Sfisifa ksar and build there an outpost to protect the town of Ain Sefra and to block the incursion of Moroccan troops and marauders. However, the Minister of War decided that such measures were not necessary for the time being and prescribed to undertake the surveillance of the movements on the borders by the Indigenous Affairs and protect the watering holes for the nomads on the Algerian side. As reported by the commander of Hadjerat El Mguil's garrison, the only significant Moroccan incident in the region was the establishment of a camp by a Pasha and his twenty soldiers about 300 metres opposite to the French post on the other side of Oued Dermel. Although summoned to leave, the Pasha answered that he was executing an order from the Sultan and he would stay there as long as he wished. However, he stayed only twenty-four hours and left towards Figuig.

The third supply convoy was constituted on May 8, transporting the necessary provisions for Igli garrison that would suffice the troops until October. The convoy, which included 2400 camels, started its journey from Djenien BouRezg escorted by Major Dutartre's column composed of one battalion from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, the mounted company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Foreign Legion, half Squadron from the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Chasseurs d'Afrique*, one squad of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Spahis, and twenty-five Goums (Tillion 1903, p. 86). Much concerning information reached the military authorities that the Holy War was declared in Tafilalet and the Doui Menia, the Oulad Djerir, and the Beni-Groumi tribes rallied the cause to fight against the French forces. It was reported that the three tribes were assembling their forces at Dar El Beida on May 10 to attack the Igli Column on its way to meet the column coming from Djenien bouRezg.

The collected information was sufficient for General Grisot to order the supply convoy to stop at Fendi (about 35 km south of Djenane Ed Dar) and rest there for few days. He requested the instructions of the Minister of War Galliffet concerning the troops' conduct vis-à-vis the Moroccans to which the Minister answered by avoiding confrontation and that the troops would not trespass the borders with Morocco. Three days later, when the situation became clearer, the supply convoy started its journey from Fendi on May 16 to meet the Igli Column at El Morra. Major Brundsaux received the supplies and returned to Igli leaving the tired camels to be taken back to Djenane Ed Dar by the supply convoy. Although the convoys travelled safely back and forth, the threat of surprise attacks of the local tribes was still eminent.



The French Consul at Fez and Doctor Linares, who was stationed in Morocco, confirmed on May 16 that the Holy War against the French troops was declared in the Tafilalet region. The news were more and more alarming since information of an army composed of nearly 80000 warriors was being organised from the Tafilalet, the Oulad Atta, and Beraber cavaliers to march on the Saoura and menace all French posts and garrisons. Although the number was exaggerated, the military authorities commenced the reinforcement of the garrisons from Ain Sefra to Igli by ordering the escort column of the third supply convoy to turn back to Igli, which it reached on May 23. Ain Sefra garrison was reinforced with one infantry battalion from Mostaganem to be transported by train, and Djenane Ed Dar was given much importance by fortifying its garrisons since it was the nearest post to Figuig village on the Moroccan side. In addition, instructions were given to put in shape all the routes from Sfisifa to Oued Zoubia.

The column commanders were instructed to respond fiercely to attacks on the convoys and chase the attackers wherever they would go even in the territories beyond Teniet El Sassi since there was no agreement on the borders with the Moroccans in such region (the territories south of Djenane Ed Dar were not concerned by the French-Moroccan frontier agreement). Therefore, a squadron of 100 Goum Cavaliers was constituted to keep under close surveillance the region between Ain Sefra and Djenien Bourezg where the Doui Menia perpetrated a razzias on a local tribe taking all their camels.

The gathered intelligence on the Moroccan military movements reported that an army composed of two Beraber columns and one Moroccan regular contingent marched towards Figuig aided by some Europeans with canons. It was reported that the army targeted Djenane Ed Dar in order to cut communication between Igli in the south and Ain Sefra in the north. Emissaries informed that the army stopped at OuedGuir for a dispatching of the first column towards Figuig, the second to Gourara and the third to the Saoura.

All these movements, which most of them were not confirmed, were manoeuvres to dissuade the French from occupying more territories than they already had occupied. They were essentially to protect the regions that the Moroccans considered not only as originally and historically Moroccan territories, but also vital for their commerce. In fact, the Moroccans considered the regions beyond the acclaimed territories as invaluable Saharan regions that had the only advantage of being situated on the passage of the caravans from and to the Sudan.

However, on June 4, 1900, reassuring news from Tangier reached the French posts and garrisons that the Moroccan government sent delegates to Tafilalet region on May 18, assigned to transmit the orders of the Sultan Moulay Abdel Aziz to the local tribes to avoid attacking the French troops and convoys. The reason for such order was that the Sultan submitted the question of the Touat to the European powers to arbitrate in the issue and he was waiting for an answer. The Sultan's order gave the French an opportunity to explore the region of Oued Guir since the Commander of the division of Ain Sefra proposed to constitute two columns of about 100 horses each, one heading towards Ain Echair and the other to Oued Guir. The Minister of War Galliffet approved the proposition under the condition that their role had to be strictly for reconnaissance purposes. In case the columns came to confront the Moroccan troops, they had to retreat and never engage in battle.

General de Ganay Commander of the Oran Division (1897-1901) proposed the adoption of a plan that would reinforce the French presence in the Zousfana, Saoura, Gourara, and Touat. The proposed military movements were as follows:

- Major Dutartre's column to return with the ill persons, and the discharged personnel from the Igli column.
- Major Exelmans's battalion to follow Dutarte's with the ill and tired camels.
- A supply convoy to be organised and sent to Igli under the escort of Major Ducroiset after the arrival of Dutarte's column at Djenane Ed Dar.
- Three Foreign Legion companies, one section of the artillery (One officer and twenty soldiers), one Spahis squad, fifty Goums, one military engineering detachment, and one provisions detachment with 800 camels to be left at Igli under the command of Colonel Bertrand.
- Major Brundsaux to leave Igli for Taghit in a column composed of one Foreign Legion company, one infantry company, one Spahis squad, 25 Goums, one military engineering detachment, one health service detachment, and one provisions detachment. He had the instruction of building a redoubt in Taghit (Tillion 1903, p.94).

### 3. The Fourth Supply Convoy and Battle of the Moungar

The fourth supply convoy started its journey from Djeniene Bourezg on July 7, 1900, in order to supply provisions for a period of three months to the garrisons of Taghit and Igli. It was escorted by a column under the command of Major Bichemin and composed of one battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> infantry, the mounted company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Foreign Legion, half Spahis squadron, and one Railway Detachment, and twenty-five Goums. The convoy arrived at Igli on July 22 in bad shape because of the summer heat. It headed northwards on the 24<sup>th</sup> bringing back 3900 camels of the 5200 it set off with from Djenien Bourezg. It was during its march back to Djenien Bourezg that it was attacked at Moungar region by 400 men from the Doui Menia tribe (Tillion 1903, p. 95).

When the convoy arrived at Zefrani safely on the 29<sup>th</sup>, Major Bichemin sent scouts to search for water in *ghedirs* or ponds in the Zousfana valley and pastures. In the afternoon, the scouts returned announcing that there was not enough water and pasture on their way because of the dry months of summer. Since water was insufficient in the wells of El Morra, Hassi El Mir, and Ksar El Adjouz, Major Bichemin decided to send a column ahead until Fendi composed of the mounted company, one Spahis squad and some Goums. On July 30, the convoy set off at 3.30 in the morning headed by a Spahis squad, and the mounted company. The latter stopped its march at dawn because a scout that had been sent earlier came back announcing that the Moroccans camped at a *ghedir*. While Major Bichemin organised the defence of the convoy, fire shots were heard from the vanguard Spahis squad that came up against a Moroccan patrol. The squad retreated to the mounted company and immediately after the commander formed a defensive square against nearly 400 cavalier warriors led by three Caids and composed of Berabers, Doui Menia, Ouled Djerir, and Beni Goumi tribes.

When the cavaliers arrived at about 200 metres of the square, they charged and opened fire killing four men. Most of them retreated under salvos of fire shots ordered by Major Bichemin, but a considerable number of them took the direction of the convoy, whereas a group of about fifty cavaliers attacked the fourth section of the column killing several men and animals and disappeared in the Erg. A group of the assailants again attacked the square of Major Bichemin, but they rapidly interrupted their attack because of the death of their Caid obliging them to retreat to the nearby mountains.

The battle of the Moungar ended at 5.00 P.M. and the convoy resumed its journey losing ten men, eight injured, and twenty-six camels and thirteen mules killed. The assailants lost the Caid of the Berabers and about few men. Half an hour later, the infantry fired on two groups of cavaliers

that disappeared without being caught. Since some Beni Goumis participated in the attack, the commander of Taghit post sanctioned them by seizing four Meharas, one horse, and obliged them to pay 800 francs in Spanish money (Tillion 1903, p.97). In the next days, the convoy was not disturbed on its way to Fendi. The news of the attack reached Djenane Ed Dar garrison that sent an infantry company and a Spahis Squad to escort it. The convoy arrived at Djenien Bou Rezg on August 7, where it was dismantled and the troops regained their original posts and companies.

The French consul at Fez informed the military authorities that the members of the gathered army near Tafilalet could not come to an agreement of what to do since the Sultan ordered a kind of armistice vis-à-vis the French. In addition, the famine that hit the region and the rise of tribal rivalries dissuaded the most reluctant of them. Therefore, based on this reassuring news, the military authorities decided to reduce the number of the military forces between Ain Sefra and Igli through the following directives:

- The Zouaves Battalion that escorted the first supply convoy to return to Oran by train.
- The Chasseurs d'Afrique squadron that occupied Oued Zoubia garrison was ordered to move to Mechria village that became vacant since the 6<sup>th</sup> *Chasseurs d'Afrique* and the 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion were sent to China.
- The 1<sup>st</sup> African Hunters to return to Mechria.
- The 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion Battalion to establish its camp at Ain Sefra village.
- The three companies and the General Staff to return to Kreider village near Saida.

While these movements were executed, the news of the Moungar attack and of the gathered cavaliers from Beni Guil and El Mouani tribes at the Moroccan borders reached the military authorities that modified the initial plan by introducing new movement instructions. Therefore, Djenane Ed Dar was reinforced with an infantry company that was stationed at Oued Zoubia garrison, and Colonel Bertrand was ordered to constitute a column of 350 men to undertake reconnaissance missions in the Zousfana and the western regions. Finally, a company was constituted under the command of Major Rogerie composed of one battalion from the 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion, one squadron from the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Chasseurs d'Afrique*, and one Mountain Section from Ain Sefra.

The French troops found themselves policing a region infested with marauders that attacked mail liaison agents and the sentinels. It was officially reported that a convoy of camels under the command of captain Boule travelling from Timimoun northwards was attacked by marauders, who left him and his men just the time to run away. This tactic of perpetrating small operations and escape to Figuig or the Moroccan territories was a means to harass the French troops that could not find a way to arrest light mounted troops. Colonel Bertrand tried to ambush the marauders by means of small and light detachments even by night but in vain, that is why on September 14, the column was dismantled. The infantry returned to Ain Sefra, and the squadron of the *Chasseurs d'Afrique* was divided between Oued Zoubia and Hadjerat El Meguil garrisons.

#### 4. The French Defeat at Mazzer and the Sala-Metarfa Battle in 1900

The second recorded attack on a French convoy was perpetrated at Mazzer about twenty-five kilometres south of Igli on August 10, 1900. The convoy was essentially herds of camels and sheep that Colonel Bertrand was obliged to send far from Igli because of the lack of pastures under an escort composed of a fraction of infantry and cavalry from the 1<sup>st</sup> Foreign Legion and a Spahis Squad. When the convoy arrived at about 4 km from Mazzer, it was separated into two groups of camels and sheep. At 2.00 in the afternoon, about 500 Doui Menia warriors attacked the detachment with two sections that one of which targeted the troops, the other took the camels away. When

Colonel Bertrand knew of the attack, he sent urgently one Spahis squad, and one small detachment of mounted legionnaires. Lieutenant Khaznadar leading the Spahis squad started chasing the Doui Menia section that took away the camels. When he reached them, he saw that they were separated into four groups.

While the first group was composed of about 150 cavaliers surrounding the section of the stolen camels, the second was of the same number and surrounded the rest of the camels, but marching about three hundred metres behind the first group. The third group included 100 cavaliers and constituted the rear-guard, and the fourth of same number remained on the right flank. The fourth group was the target of the mounted legionnaires who opened fire on it killing some of the cavaliers and keeping them from attacking the Spahis squad that attacked the group escorting the camels taking back about forty camels. The second and third groups tried to fire back but they were overwhelmed by the charge of the mounted legionnaires who killed about forty cavaliers (Tillion, 1903, p.101).

The chase continued about fifteen kilometres, which pushed the assailants to leave two thirds of the camels and took only those the head group managed to spare. The Spahis lost two men in the battle and returned to Igli. Although this was the last battle fought against a group of the autochthons, there happened isolated attacks perpetrated by small groups against Oued Zoubia garrison, Hadjerat El Mguil, and Djeniene Bou Rezg, but they were repelled back without losses. By mid-September, a small column was sent from Djenane Ed Dar to prevent and drive away a group of 150 members of Oulad Djerir tribe that tried to collect dates from the oasis of Fendi (about thirty kilometres south of Djenane Ed Dar). The Mazzer battle proved that the local tribes were still a real threat to the French presence in the region.

The Sala-Metarfa battle in Touat happened on August 30, 1900, and was caused by the attack of seventy Berabers on a mail order squad composed of one Spahis and a Goum that delivered a letter from Captain Falconetti, who went on tour in the region of Metrafa, Timimoun. The Goum was killed, but the Spahis could reach the post of Timimoun although he was seriously injured. In this letter, Captain Falconetti asked for reinforcement by the artillery because he noticed that the population of Ksar Ould Rached was very hostile to the presence of the French troops. When Captain Falconetti arrived at Sala-Metarfa on August 29 in the company of Captain Pein, who was at the head of ninety-one Goums, he found that the dunes were occupied by armed groups in defensive state. The defenders succeeded in repelling two attacks of Captain Falconetti and caused serious casualties on the side of the French (Martin, 1908, 169). The Berabers that joined Metarfa killed Lieutenant Depardieu, two French sergeants, and two indigenous infantrymen. (Martin, 1908, 170) The ineffective attack on Metarfa obliged Captain Falconetti to retreat to Deldoul village to rest and wait for the reinforcement from Timimoun that he asked for in his letter.

At Deldoul, Captain Falconetti was informed that the Berabers were part of a *rezzou* composed of 180 Chaamba dissidents, warriors from Talmin and Charouin, and Ghenanmas, and it was this column that attacked the Spahis that delivered the letter to Timimoun. On September 4, a reinforcement column from Timimoun arrived at Deldoul, and the next day it headed towards Metarfa. Although the artillery was present and the infantry was reinforced, the capture of Metarfa was impossible to realise, and again the French suffered heavy losses. The overall French losses the Sala-Metarfa were thirteen dead including Captain Jacques and Lieutenant Depardieu and some infantrymen in their sections, 36 injured, and one missing person (Martin, 1908, 172). In the afternoon, Captain Falconetti's column retreated to Deldoul, and on August 6, it headed towards Timimoun that it reached two days later. The corpses of the French officers and their subalterns



could not be reclaimed only after two months. The military authorities attributed this failure to many causes mainly:

- The unexpected participation of the Berabers in the battle, and their presence was not signalled to Captain Falconetti.
- The lack of cohesion between the officers who were of the same rank.
- Insufficient reinforcement from Timimoun as regards the number of infantrymen, ammunition, and armament.
- Bad preparation of the troops to execute orders efficiently.

When General Grisot, the commander of the 19<sup>th</sup> Corps, received the report of the failure of Metarfa, he ordered the nomination of Colonel Cauchemez as the Military commander of the oases. This nomination was intended to establish a general staff commanded by a high rank officer over all the occupied territories of Saoura, Gourara, Touat, and Tidikelt. General Grisot also intended to restrain zealous officers from committing irreparable acts prejudicial to the local populations and to the French army. He also ordered the movement of the company of 1<sup>st</sup> infantry from El Golea to Timimoun under the command of Major Quiquandon to reinforce the garrison there in case the dissident Berabers and the hostile tribes would be encouraged by the defeat at Metarfa to attack Timimoun. The company could not leave El Golea only on October 4, 1900, because it was difficult to provide the necessary number of camels. In addition, the commanding officers of the columns and the territory administration officers received the following formal instructions:

- To comply to and maintain the statutory limitations relating to the pacific conquest of the Saharan territories.
- To avoid bloody conflicts, when absolutely necessary, with the sedentary populations that did not take part in the Metarfa incident.
- To save the means of repression to the groups of plunderers and invaders when these are found only on the itinerary of the convoys.
- All convoys to return back from the established posts in Igli (Tillion 1903, p.115).

In the meantime, Charles Jonnart replaced Laferriere as the Governor General of Algeria from October 3, 1900 to June 18, 1901. This nomination had a great impact of the French colonial policy since there was a change from an energetic policy of military occupation and colonisation that Laferriere endorsed and pushed the others to expand the French territorial acquisitions, to a policy of pacific intervention that relied on the hospitality of the autochthons and common interests to settle and maintain the French presence in the Sahara. Immediately after he had consulted the military authorities, the new Governor proposed a plan of action completely different from that proposed by Laferriere. The project was adopted by the government and included the following instructions:

- No military operations in the Touat were authorised
  - The reinforcement of the garrisons of Timimoun, In Salah, and In Rhar had to be initiated.
  - Peaceful means had to be used to influence the autochthons in Touat and get their submission. Military force could be used only as the last resort and only for defence.
  - The occupation of the Tidikelt, Touat, and Gourara regions had to be undertaken in priority by the indigenous elements in the army.
  - The decision and order of execution of the operations were attributed to the Governor General.
- Colonel Cauchemez did not share the views that the Governor advocated. He believed that the autochthons did not hide their hostility to the French troops, and in this condition, it was necessary

to inflict a severe punishment to the rebellious ksour. He based his standpoint on the alarming situation in the Tidikelt indicated in the reports of the garrisons that proved that the region was to all appearances calm, but the inhabitants were in fact very hostile to the French presence and looked for the opportunity to chase them away as it happened in Metarfa. This hostility and the presence of Beraber marauders seen in Bouda obliged the military authorities to build a garrison in Aoulef. In addition, the inhabitants of Sala and Metarfa were building surrounding walls preparing to resist French attacks. The situation in the region made it impossible to execute the Governor's plan, and another plan with a budget of 1,300,000 Francs (Tillion, 1903, p.118) was proposed to face the exigencies of the moment. The plan was put in operation under the following directives:

- Making the troops execute rounds in the districts west of Gourara and then head towards Touat through Tsabit.
- Building a garrison in Adrar.
- Supervising and coordinating the operations had to be undertaken by the General commanding Algiers's Division.
- Constituting a column of 650 men intended to be ready on December 15, 1900. However, the difficulty to keep the 5000 camels at El Golea because of the lack of pastures obliged the authority to proceed in the journey of the column in sections, which travelled successively to Mac Mahon fort then to Timimoun to transport the provisions for the troops stationed there.

At last, the Minister of War gave his order to start the colonial expansion in the Tidikelt, Touat and Gourara on December 27, 1900. The column for this expansion was commanded by Colonel Menestrel assisted by Major Deleuze. It was composed of thirty officers, 673 members, thirty-three mules, and 1292 camels. It was reinforced by an artillery section, ammunition column, and three sanitary sections, and two administrative elements. The operations were chronologically divided into three parties. The first part started on January 30, 1901, and ended on February 21, in which the French columns undertook operations in the south-west of the Gourara and the Touat. The second part started on February 22, and ended on March 15 of the same year, where military operations against the Berabers and the ksour of Charouin and Telmine were executed. The third part, which started on March 16 and ended on April 13, 1901, announced the completion of the operations in Touat and the return of the troops back to their respective garrisons.

By the end of this part of the colonial expansion, troops from the divisions of Algiers and Oran were combined in Oued Saoura for future instructions. Henceforward, the French occupied the whole territories south of Oran as far as the Saharan regions of the Touat where they succeeded in eliminating the Moroccan influence and pacifying the local tribes of the Zousfana Valley, Bechar, and Saoura region

### Conclusion

The initial plan of the French authorities to conquer the Sahara by occupying the Tuareg territories was gradually abandoned after the Foureau-Lamy mission (1898-1900) that crossed the Sahara and reached the Congo proving that it was possible to unify the French colonies. It became clear that it was nearly impossible to realise any immediate benefits on the marking out of the Foureau-Lamy expedition. Since the western borders with Morocco were more promising to realise the occupation of the Algerian Sahara, the French authorities set themselves the intermediary objective of occupying the Zousfana Valley and the whole Saoura region including Bechar town.

The military operations engaged in the two regions were fastidious due to the hard Saharan climatic conditions that enabled the movement of military columns only four or five months. In

addition, the geographic characteristic of the two regions since they bordered the Moroccan territories gave the local tribes the possibility to attack the French convoys and cross the borders to seek refuge. After quite long resistance of the local tribes, the French succeeded in occupying vast Saharan territories, which had the effect of isolation the Moroccan Kingdom and weakening its economy, and eventually, realising the final objective namely its occupation. However, the international tensions created by the Europeans scramble over the African territories hindered the French from executing their project in a short time. The Spanish, the English, and the Germans had an eye on Morocco because of all the economic, political, and geographic potentials that the country offered to its future coloniser. The French occupation of Morocco that started from Bechar is an interesting topic of discussion for research.

### **Comments and explanations**

- 1 Ksours plural of Ksar, from Arabic meaning castle built mainly with adobe and local material such as dirt, straw, and palm tree trunks.
- 2 The Moroccan territories situated west of the Atlas Mountains were called Blad El Mekhzen since they were under the direct control of the Sultan, but those territories east of the Atlas Mountains that were not under his direct control were called Blad EsSiba, meaning the country without laws.

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