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Violence in Algeria, 1830–37

Inter-Arab Violence

In the early days of the conquest, French soldiers offered a stark picture of the barbarism of conflict between tribes in Algeria. In June 1832, for instance, the Ouled Sidi e-Arabi had seized fourteen rival chiefs, nine of whom were from the Medjeher, and ‘cut them into pieces’.¹ Later that year, the Aga of the Bey of Constantine had mounted a surprise attack on rival tribes, in which he had cut off the heads of 22 men as well as ‘committing all sorts of horrors on their women and girls’.² Months later that very same Aga was ‘decapitated’, along with fourteen other courtiers, by Ahmed Bey. The tribes around Bône greatly feared that they would be the next of Bey’s targets while, d’Uzer, the French commander, reported that his army was unable to offer them protection due to their insufficient numbers.³

In some senses, the fact that the land they proposed to ‘conquer’ was divided among so many rival tribes and was so fragmented as compared with the picture they had perhaps had of the territory of the ‘Ottoman Empire’ which they believed their imperium to be succeeding seemed to have surprised French commanders in Algeria. Numerous letters from the period described the poor relations which existed among tribes.⁴ The prevalence of atrocities, massacres and decapitations, by contrast, seemed quite natural to French writers, for they accorded with the picture of North Africa the Europeans carried with them. While in Europe, the massacre of civilians, Brower noted, was ‘hideous, abhorrent. In Africa, it is war itself’.⁵

In French accounts, tribesmen never ‘died in combat’ or were ‘killed’, but were either ‘decapitated’, ‘massacred’ or ‘shorn of their heads’. The scale of such assaults was also regarded as noteworthy by French

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correspondents, with ‘35 heads being cut’ when ‘two tribes allied to the Bey of Constantine were victims of the vengeance of their rivals’, 6 157 of the Beni Amer were beheaded by the Douair and the Sméla, while Ahmed Bey ‘cut off 200 heads’ and decapitated a rival whose tribe included a young woman whom he coveted. 8 Abd el-Kader evidently became an emblem of such practices, ‘decapitating’, for example, the cadi of Cherchell in April 1837 and ‘beheading 30 of the tribal chiefs who recognized Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah Ouled-Sidi Chigr’ – a rival and a potential French ally – in January 1842, 9 while in December 1835 his troops had ‘pillaged Mascara and massacred many Jews [... leaving the town entirely destroyed’. 10

Such accounts of tribal violence in Algeria played an important role in describing the character of the environment in which the French now found themselves. While decapitations and massacres could have been viewed as being strange and noteworthy, they were quickly accepted as ‘natural’ forms of political life in the Maghreb, confirming French preconceptions as to the essential barbarism and difference of this theatre of war. Meshed to the broader European claim that empire provided the opportunity to reorient backward societies towards the progressive path to civilisation was the notion that cultures of violence in the Maghreb were symbolic of its retarded culture.

More particularly, there was a sense that such forms of violence constituted a form of language or communication in North Africa, for beheadings and decapitations were evidently designed for the purposes of display – expressive of notions of power to rival tribes, to others in a region and to the massacring tribe’s own sense of identity. This ethnographic claim joined a stock of other preconceptions as to how one might read such violence, which also included the observation that attacks in Algeria often aspired to be completist, which is to say that massacres had as their goal the complete elimination of a tribe or its leadership. Embedded in the logic of the raid one might find the dream of the tabula rasa in which one’s own self could be more amply expressed without the burden of others. As Brower remarks, ‘the violence did have a political purpose. It recorded a crude sort of message, inscribing its meaning on the bodies of victims, people who became “debris”. These survivors served as a grim symbol, a memento mori announcing the new regime’s massive and inscrutable power, which was almost god-like in its intensity.’ 11 ‘Ultimately’, Brower suggests, ‘this violence was probably less about impressing people about to be colonized than a way for the French army to impress itself’, which seems partly correct, but only partly so, for while such violence was expressive of French fears