

Crimes of France in Tazarka, Tunisia (1952): According to Algerian Newspapers *Al-Basa'ir* and *Al-Manar*



Ouabel abdelaziz*

Djillali bounaama university of khemis miliana,
a.ouabel@univ-dbk.m.dz

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Abstract

After the end of the Second World War in 1945, the Tunisian people became convinced that the time had come to free themselves from the grip of French colonialism. France emerged from the war with heavy losses, as its urban and economic infrastructure had been destroyed, in addition to the significant human casualties it had suffered. At the beginning of 1952, armed struggle broke out in Tunisia following the arrest of Tunisian leaders, foremost among them Habib Bourguiba. In response, the French authorities resorted to repressive methods aimed at intimidating the Tunisian population. They committed horrific massacres against innocent civilians in several regions of the country, including the village of Tazarka in the Cap Bon region between January 28 and February 2, 1952.

This study seeks to reveal the true nature of French colonialism, which relied on violence in all its forms as a tool to suppress freedoms and eliminate the demands of colonized people, particularly after the decline of its international standing following the end of the Second World War in 1945. Numerous massacres were committed in the territories under its control, and this massacre stands as one in a series of its crimes.

key words: Tazarka village, colonial crimes, Tunisia, French colonialism.

Introduction:

* Corresponding Author

Since imposing its protectorate over Tunisia in 1881, France adopted repressive policies and committed heinous crimes against the Tunisian people, implementing a criminal plan aimed at exterminating Tunisians without distinction between children, women, and the elderly. The massacres in the town of Tazarka and other areas of the Cap Bon region in late January and early February 1952 stand as testimony to the brutality of French colonialism. In this town, innocent civilians were killed, homes were destroyed, the sanctity of sacred places—including mosques—was violated, and Tunisian women were subjected to abuses.

Based on these facts, the following research question is raised: To what extent did the two newspapers contribute to exposing the criminal acts committed by the French army in the Tunisian town of Tazarka? This main question gives rise to several sub-questions: What was the impact of these massacres on the inhabitants of the town? And how did they affect the course of the armed struggle in Tunisia?

Regarding the methodology of this study, it relies on the historical method by recounting the events experienced by the inhabitants of Tazarka village from beginning to end, as well as the descriptive method, which enables us to determine the geography of the areas affected by this brutal attack in the Cap Bon region and to describe the hysterical state of the French army as it killed innocent infants, elderly people, and women.

1-The Imposition of the French Protectorate on Tunisia and the Declaration of Armed Struggle

1-1 The Imposition of the French Protectorate on Tunisia

Several factors led to the imposition of the French protectorate over Tunisia in 1881. Some were internal, notably the misguided economic and fiscal policies of the Tunisian beys and their treatment of the population. Others were external, particularly the penetration of European capitalism into Tunisia and its control over the country's resources in terms of production and marketing. As a result, state revenues declined and public debt increased significantly. (kareem, 2008, p. 09)

When the Tunisian government became unable to repay its debts in 1869, the major powers with interests in Tunisia—France, Britain, and Italy—declared its bankruptcy. They agreed to place the Regency's finances under their control to safeguard the interests of their citizens who had lent money to the bey. Consequently, an international financial commission was established, composed of Tunisians and foreigners. This commission effectively acted as a Ministry of Finance for all the Regency's revenues, exercising direct oversight of state resources. The bey

was no longer allowed to conclude any loan agreement or grant any concession without its approval. (Mahdjoubi, 1986, p. 10)

After securing the consent of Germany and Britain at the Congress of Berlin (El- kayali, 1994, p. 520), France sought a pretext to justify military intervention in Tunisia. At the beginning of 1881, it claimed that the Tunisian Khroumir tribes were threatening its presence in Algeria by attacking Algerian border tribes and plundering their lands and livestock. This was a weak pretext, ridiculed even in some French circles.

Nevertheless, France organized a military campaign, crossed the border, besieged and occupied the city of Tunis. As a result, the Bey of Tunisia (AL-Douki, 2016, pp. 313-314), Muhammad III as-Sadiq, was compelled on May 12, 1881, to sign the Treaty of Bardo. This treaty allowed France to occupy any regions it deemed necessary to ensure security and order along the borders.

Subsequently, the Convention of La Marsa was signed on June 8, 1883, by Bey Ali III Bey and Paul Cambon. This agreement consolidated the French protectorate over Tunisia and remedied the shortcomings of the Treaty of Bardo, granting France the right to intervene in Tunisia's internal affairs. (El- shater, 2005, p. 32)

2-1 The Declaration of Armed Struggle in Tunisia in 1952

Armed struggle in Tunisia against French colonial rule was declared in 1952 as a result of the repressive policies adopted by the ruling authorities, particularly after the appointment of the Resident General Jean de Hauteclocque (EL-Abidi, 1953, p. 37), one of the most hardline and racist colonial officials. He arrived in Tunisia on January 13, 1952, aboard the warship *Marceau*, accompanied by fighter aircraft, in a display of force signaling the adoption of a policy of violence and repression in the country (kareem, 2008, pp. 154-156).

The new Resident General immediately began implementing arbitrary measures against Tunisian leaders. On January 18, 1952, the nationalist leader Habib Bourguiba and Mongi Slim, director of the Neo-Destour Party, were arrested on January 18, 1952, and transferred to El Aouina Airport near Tunis, then taken to an unknown location before being placed under house arrest in Tabarka, on the Mediterranean coast near the Algerian border.

A large number of Destourians and communists were also arrested, including Maurice Nizard and Mohamed Nefaa, along with many trade

unionists. The French authorities deported other detainees to Remada in the south of the country (El-qassab, 1986, p. 626).

Thus, the period of Jean de Hauteclocque's rule (January 18, 1952 – September 2, 1953) witnessed a wave of repression, torture, arrests, exile, and a policy of liquidation and assassinations targeting leaders of the Tunisian national movement. Among the most prominent victims was the trade union leader Farhat Hached, who was assassinated on December 5, 1952, in the area of Radès, in the capital Tunis (EL-CHARIF, 1993, p. 32).

2 Introduction to *Al-Manar* and *Al-Basa'ir*

1–2 Introduction to the Algerian Newspaper *Al-Basa'ir*

Al-Basa'ir was one of the leading national reformist newspapers and served as the official mouthpiece of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama. It was founded by the Association on December 27, 1935, and adopted as its motto the Qur'anic verse: *"There have come to you clear insights from your Lord. So whoever sees does so for his own benefit, and whoever is blind does so to his own detriment. And I am not a guardian over you."*

It was among the most important and widely circulated newspapers issued by the Association. It lasted for thirteen years and was published in two series. The first series ran from 1935 to 1939, and it was suspended on the eve of the Second World War by order of its president, Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis.

After the end of the Second World War in 1945, the newspaper reappeared in 1947 under the presidency of Mohamed Bachir El Ibrahimi, following an eight-year interruption (lounici , 2014, p. 367), and continued publication until late 1956. It was issued in Algiers and printed at the Arab Press owned by Sheikh Ibrahim Abu al-Yaqzan. The first issue of the second series was published on November 25, 1947.

With the outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence, the newspaper dedicated a page titled *"Daily Reports on the Algerian Crisis,"* which was often edited by Sheikh Ahmed Tawfiq al-Madani. He was among the most prominent national figures who wrote for the newspaper. For example, he published articles under the title *"Political Forum"* and sometimes under the pseudonym "Abu Muhammad."

Due to the difficult circumstances of the liberation struggle and the colonial authorities' close surveillance of all nationalist and Arab

activities, the management of **Al-Basa'ir** decided to suspend its publication on April 6, 1956, after issuing 366 editions. The newspaper had accompanied the events of the liberation revolution for nearly two years (Nasser, 2006, p. 268).

2-2 Introduction to the Algerian Newspaper **Al-Manar**

Al-Manar was a semi-monthly, political, cultural, and religious independent newspaper founded in Algiers (Mertad, 2003, p. 266) by Mahmoud Bouzouzou. (Ferrad, 2007, p. 28) Regarding its establishment, its founder stated:

“Some friends affiliated with the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties proposed that I publish a non-partisan national newspaper. They guaranteed printing and distribution rights while ensuring editorial independence, on the condition that it would spread the national spirit throughout the country. Thus, **Al-Manar** was born” (Bouzouzou, 1982, p. no page).

Several nationalist writers from different ideological trends contributed to its editorial work, most notably supporters of the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (Saadallah, 1998, p. 271). Although it appeared independent, it was in fact affiliated with the aforementioned party. The first issue was published on March 29, 1951, and it continued publication until January 1, 1954. Its final issue was No. 51. The newspaper was printed at the Arab Press owned by Ibrahim Abu al-Yaqzan in Algiers (Nasser, 2006, p. 266).

The newspaper paid considerable attention to cultural topics (Hilal, 1992, p. 181). It did not limit itself to national issues but also addressed the concerns of Arab and Islamic countries in general, and the Maghreb in particular, especially Tunisia and Morocco. It gained popularity in the Maghrebi market, which led the colonial authorities to ban its entry into the two aforementioned countries (Ihdaden, 1991, p. 101). It also faced restrictions from the French authorities, which eventually led to its suspension in Morocco. As reported in one of its issues:

“We have received letters from **Al-Manar** distributors in Morocco informing us that the French Protectorate authorities in Morocco have issued an order prohibiting the sale of this newspaper in the brotherly country” (Bouzouzou, Entry to Morocco is prohibited, 1951, p. 02).

Among the most prominent Algerian nationalist writers who contributed to the newspaper were its director Mahmoud Bouzouzou, Mohamed Mahfoudhi, and Abdelhamid Mehri, as well as the Tunisian writer Rachid Idriss.

3– Introduction to the Region of Tazarka

The town of Tazarka is one of the municipalities of Nabeul Governorate in northeastern Tunisia, within the Cap Bon region, which includes, in addition to Tazarka, the towns of Kelibia, Hammam El-Ghezaz, and others. It was subjected to sweeping military operations between January 28 and February 2, 1952, in what was termed the operation of “cleansing and maintaining security and order.” These operations involved assaults on women and the killing of infants by the French occupation army (kareem, 2008, p. 155).

Tazarka is a small village, isolated from the main roads, known for the industriousness of its inhabitants and their strong work ethic. Its primary economic activity is agriculture, and its population did not exceed seven hundred inhabitants at the time. Like other Tunisian villages, it had a local branch of the Neo-Destour Party headed by a young man known for his firmness and determination, Wahid al-Masadi.

Tazarka became renowned for its patriotism and played an active role in the history of the national movement. It clashed with French forces in 1938, and a number of its young men were tried, many of whom died in French prisons in colonial Algeria. The town shared in the hopes and sufferings of the Tunisian people as a whole. It lived a calm and peaceful life, as if it were a single family. There were neither French gendarmes nor police stationed there. Although neighboring towns witnessed several demonstrations, and despite the fact that its inhabitants had not initially been subjected to arrests, this did not prevent Tazarka from becoming one of the first inland areas to experience brutal French repression (Belhawan, 2017, p. 218).

4 – Crimes of French Colonialism in Tazarka and Other Areas of Cap Bon, Tunisia

The Algerian newspaper *Al-Manar* reported that French troops resorted to repressive operations in this region of Tunisia from January 20, 1952, until early February, following the appointment of the new Resident General Jean de Hauteclocque on January 13 of the same year. According to the newspaper, these repressive methods evoked memories of the brutal Spanish occupation of Tunisia in the sixteenth century, as passed down through generations, due to their savagery and atrocity. They were also likened to the actions of the Nazis and the secret police during the Second World War.

This account was based on the testimony of the article’s author, who visited the affected areas in the Cap Bon region accompanied by a

committee tasked with investigating these operations. The actions carried out by the French troops in the region were officially described as “operations of cleansing and maintaining security and order” (Chalbi, 1952, p. 01).

4-1 Crimes of French Colonialism in Tazarka

The village of Tazarka was attacked by French soldiers after they had surrounded it from all sides. A large number of men were gathered in the town's main square and left there for 24 hours, spending the entire night outdoors in the harsh winter cold.

The soldiers then stormed homes where women and children were present, smashed household furniture, completely destroyed food supplies, looted money and women's jewelry, stripped women of their clothing, and subjected them to violent assaults. The physical effects of these abuses on some women were documented by Dr. Tawhida Ben Cheikh and Dr. Badra Ouerthani, who were members of the investigative committee.

Five houses were blown up with dynamite in retaliation against their owners for being members of the local Neo-Destour branch. Several young men were shot dead without trial. Four infants were also killed, reportedly trampled under the soldiers' boots. The troops entered the village mosque, stepped on the prayer area with their shoes, and tore copies of the Qur'an (Chalbi, 1952, p. 04).

4-2 Crimes of French Colonialism in Other Areas of Cap Bon

French colonial repression was not limited to the town of Tazarka; other areas of the Cap Bon region in Tunisia experienced similar operations. In the town of Maâmoura, French troops blew up the Zawiya of Sidi Ben Aïssa, where local inhabitants used to pray and teach their children the Qur'an and the basic principles of knowledge. Among the rubble, remnants of children's wooden tablets were found bearing Qur'anic verses (Chalbi, 1952, p. 04).

In the town of Kelibia, also part of the Cap Bon region, French soldiers executed eleven people by firing squad without trial. Among them were the young Mohamed El Gharbi, head of the Free Youth of the Old Destour Party, and Aziz Khoja, head of the Free Youth of the Neo-Destour Party. They were executed by Brigadier Bombina after being taken from their homes and from among their families in retaliation for their political activism (Chalbi, 1952, p. 04).

The author of the article described these massacres as follows:

> “The military repression operations carried out in this region of Tunisia, where troops have been stationed since January 20 until February

1, recall the events of the Spanish occupation of Tunisia in the sixteenth century, whose brutality and savagery are still recounted to this day. They also remind us of the actions of the Nazis and the Gestapo during the Second World War..." (Chalbi, 1952, pp. 1-4).

In the same context, the Algerian newspaper *Al-Basa'ir* followed these painful events that affected the inhabitants of Tazarka, Kelibia, Beni Khalled, and other towns and villages of Cap Bon. The author of the article described the heinous crimes committed against unarmed civilians as atrocities, sins, and outrages. He summarized the consequences of this catastrophe as follows: "...During three dark and grim days, this 'successful' military operation—considered by colonialism as one of its noblest and most honorable acts—was carried out by destroying the food supplies and provisions of the region, demolishing dozens of homes with dynamite, executing groups of inhabitants without trial, raping young girls, violating the sanctity of women, looting whatever was light to carry and valuable in price, killing infant children, arresting thousands of 'suspects,' and burning a rich library..." (Abu Mohammad, 1952, p. 6).

These terrorist operations were carried out by paratrooper units, the Foreign Legion, gendarmerie forces, and Senegalese riflemen in what was called "Operation Mars" (*Opération Mars*), under the command of Colonel Shmuckel, between January 28 and February 2, 1952. During this period, twenty-six Tunisians—including children and women—were killed without any act of resistance or confrontation on their part.

The objective of this collective killing was to instill fear among the population, undermine the morale of resistance fighters in the region and throughout the country, and send a message to anyone who might consider resisting France: not only would the individual be punished, but also the local inhabitants who supported him (AL-Sghir, 2004, p. 276).

Conclusion

Through this study and the available historical data, several important conclusions can be drawn:

- Journalistic material constitutes an important historical source for understanding the struggles of peoples in their fight for liberation.
- Algerian national newspapers in the early 1950s contributed to enlightening public opinion at the national, Maghrebi, and Arab levels, exposing the reality of French colonialism and its repressive practices in Tunisia, including arrests, exile, forced displacement, assassinations, and massacres.

- The newspapers **Al-Basa'ir** and **Al-Manar** closely followed the events in Tazarka, Tunisia, in 1952, exposing the massacres committed by French soldiers against unarmed civilians, including elders, women, and children, who endured a week of terror.
- Both newspapers expressed strong condemnation of the repressive practices of the French occupation in Tunisia, particularly during the period of the extremist Resident General Jean de Hauteclocque.
- French soldiers wreaked havoc in homes, causing extensive damage to property, destroying furniture, provisions, and personal savings.
- These massacres deeply affected the psyche of Tazarka's inhabitants, instilling fear across all age groups.
- The French colonial forces did not limit themselves to looting and destruction; they also violated the honor and dignity of Tunisian women.
- Among the most horrific acts committed in Tazarka was the killing of infants, who were trampled underfoot and thrown to the ground.
- A war fine of 80,000 francs was imposed on the population by order of the French civil commissioner due to the cutting of a telephone pole.
- French occupation troops also desecrated religious sanctities, storming the village mosque, tearing copies of the Qur'an, and destroying books of Hadith and Islamic jurisprudence.
- These writings published in the two newspapers reflected solidarity and support for the brotherly Tunisian people in their struggle against French colonialism.

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