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Abstract :

This study, "The French Colonial Authority and the Organization of the Border Region Between Algeria and the Tunisian Regency (1838–1881)," explores the colonial challenge of defining the Algerian-Tunisian frontier and restricting the mobility of border tribes. Drawing on archival sources from both Algerian and Tunisian repositories, it highlights the perspectives of General Randon regarding Algerian tribes and the position of the Tunisian Beylik authority, represented by the Bey and his officials. The debates over the border and tribal movements began in 1838, following the French capture of Constantine, marking a turning point in regional dynamics. The research provides a historical overview of the border prior to French occupation, examines the Bey of Tunis's stance toward Algerian tribes after Constantine fell under French control, and analyzes the colonial authority's policies toward border tribes and the process of delimitation. It reveals the strategic tensions shaping this sensitive frontier zone.

Keywords: *Algeria–Tunisia Border–General Randon–Bey of Tunis–Tribal Mobility Restrictions–Border Delimitation.*

المخلص :

في هذه الدراسة الموسومة بـ "السلطة الاستعمارية الفرنسية وتنظيم المجال الحدودي بين الجزائر والولاية التونسية 1838_1881م"، نسلط الضوء على أحد أهم القضايا التي عملت عليها السلطة الاستعمارية في الجزائر، وهي رسم الحدود بين الجزائر وتونس والحد من حركية القبائل الحدودية الجزائرية والتونسية، وذلك من منطلق الوثيقة الأرشيفية التي تعد أساس البحث التاريخي، ووثائق هذه الدراسة موزعة بين الأرشيف التونسي والجزائري، والتي بينت لنا مواقف الجنرال راندون من القبائل الجزائرية، وموقف سلطة إيالة تونس الممثلة في الباي وموظفيه، وتعود بدايات الحديث عن الحد والقبائل الحدودية بين الجزائر وتونس إلى سنة 1838م، أي بعد سقوط قسنطينة. ولتغطية الموضوع ركزنا على: إعطاء لمحة تاريخية على الحدود الجزائرية التونسية قبل الاحتلال الفرنسي، وموقف باي تونس من القبائل الجزائرية بعد سقوط قسنطينة، كما تعرضنا لموقف سلطة الاحتلال من القبائل الحدودية الجزائرية وأعمال ترسيم الحدود.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحدود الجزائرية-التونسية – الجنرال راندون – باي تونس-قيود التنقل على

القبائل – ترسيم الحدود

1. Introduction

In this study, we focus on examining a highly complex issue in the history of Algerian-Tunisian relations during the early period of the French occupation of Algeria and the role of major tribes that crossed the border area, which the colonial authority sought to establish in order to restrict their movement and exert economic and military pressure on them. The crossing of Algerian and Tunisian tribes beyond the agreed boundary was considered a violation of colonial authority, and their reception on Tunisian territory, where they sought refuge, ignited conflicts between the two powers. As a result, these tribes became a crucial element in the struggle between the French occupation and the Tunisian authority, particularly during the period when colonial officials were working on demarcating the border between the two countries. On multiple occasions, the colonial authority demanded the return of Algerian tribes from Tunisia, employing various methods, and did not remain silent about the transgressions of Tunisian tribes.

Through this study, we aim to understand the policies adopted by the colonial authority to subjugate the border tribes and pressure the eastern neighboring authority to stand against them, ensuring their adherence to the border imposed by France between Algerian and Tunisian tribes. This topic holds significant importance, as archival documents, mainly correspondence between Tunisian and French administrative officials, reveal the positions of both the colonial and Tunisian authorities regarding the tribes that crossed the border due to economic and military pressure. Our research is framed by the following key questions: What was the stance of the French colonial authority regarding the movements of Algerian and Tunisian border tribes? and How were the borders between Algeria and Tunisia drawn during the early period of the French occupation of Algeria?

2. Description of the Study Sample

To answer the research question, we relied on documents sent from Constantine to the Pasha of Algiers, *Hussein Pasha*. These documents consist of detailed report-like letters sent by *Ahmed Bey* to the Pasha, informing him about the situation in the Beylik, the movements of the tribes and local leaders. These documents are part of collection 1642 in the Manuscripts Department of the National Library of El Hamma. In these letters, *Ahmed Bey* informs the Pasha about the subjects (tribes) who arrived in *Le Kef* with their wealth and demanded

their return by the Bey of Tunis. He also requested the return of funds, which he described as belonging to the *Beylik*. Additionally, we used documents from the Tunisian archives, mainly consisting of letters or responses to the concerns of *Ahmed Bey* or the *Dey of Algiers*. Among the key documents we relied on is Box 213, File 245, which contains a collection of exchanged letters between French administrative officials in Algeria and the Tunisian administration concerning border matters.

3. A Historical Overview of the Algerian-Tunisian Border Before the French Occupation

The Ottomans in Tunisia had two border conflicts with the *regency of algiers*. The first occurred in **1614** and ended with an agreement between both parties establishing that the *Hafa Mountains*, *Qulub al-Thiran*, *Ayhirsh*, *Oued Mellègue*, and *Oued Serat* would serve as a boundary between the two territories. According to this agreement, the lands to the east belonged to the *Tunisian Ojak*, while those to the west fell under the *Algerian Ojak*.

The second conflict, known as "**The Great Battle**", took place in **1628** due to disputes and instability among the border tribes, particularly the *Banu Shanuf* tribe. Historian *Ibn Abi Dinar* described this tribe as "*the source of discord between the military forces.*" Additionally, the *Hanancha* tribe resisted paying taxes, further fueling tensions. This conflict resulted in the defeat of the *Tunisian Ottoman* army, led by Admiral *Kabudan Usta Murad al-Jinawi*. The hostilities concluded with a peace agreement on **June 16, 1628**, which reaffirmed the **1614 treaty** defining the geographic boundaries of each *regency*. Additional clauses were introduced to regulate the population under the authority of each territory (Henia, 2012). Regarding this conflict, historian *Ibn Abi Diyaf* wrote:

"A war broke out between him and the ruler of Algiers due to disputes over the border between the two kingdoms, instigated by Sheikh Thabit bin Shanuf, who at the time controlled the affairs of Le Kef. After the Algerians prevailed in what became known as the Battle of Satara in Ramadan of the year 1037 AH (1628 AD), peace was established through the mediation of dignitaries." (Ibn Abī al-Diyāf, 1963. p39)

In the late Ottoman period, particularly during the rule of *Ahmed Bey*, he wrote reports to *Dey Hussein*, stating:

"Al-Hajj Mubarak and all those with him from the Hanancha... departed until they settled in Serat... He kept sending messages requesting entry into the

eastern homeland, but we were informed that the Bey of Tunis prevented them from doing so. He dispatched local leaders nearby and ordered them to block the subjects of the west, not allowing any of them to enter their homeland. When we learned of this, we acted quickly, moved to the farthest lands of the Hanancha, and restricted their passageways. We granted them amnesty, ordered their return, and collected the penalty. There are forty men... guarding the gate of Le Kef, Rajab 1242 AH (February 1827", (National Library of El Hamma, Coll n° 1642, Doc n° 15).

From this document, it appears that *Ahmed Bey* focused on the following points:

- The demand to enter Tunisian territory beyond *Oued Serat*.
- The position of the *Bey of Tunis*, who prevented Algerian subjects from entering Tunisia and adhered to an agreement with the *Beylik* to return the subjects of both territories to their homeland.
- *Ahmed Bey's* movement to the farthest Hanancha lands, restricting their passage, and granting them amnesty.
- Forcing them to return and collecting the penalty.

4. The Position of the Bey of Tunis on Algerian Tribes After the Fall of Constantine

The Bey of Tunis, Ahmed Bey (1837–1855) (Hassan Hosni, 1994. p 148) wrote to the inhabitants of eastern Algeria, urging them to join his ranks and abandon resistance alongside Hadj Ahmed Bey of Constantine. In his message, he stated:

"Since Algeria has suffered what it has suffered, and since God's decree was predetermined, you are now in chaos and exposed... You have no security from conflict, nor the ability to defend yourselves. Remaining in this state will lead to division and the eradication of a Muslim nation. The French army is far beyond your strength and power, so you must join us and abandon the fight, for it is akin to casting yourselves into destruction. In such circumstances, believers must be like a solidly joined structure, supporting one another." (Amirawi, 2002 p.68)

Haj Ahmed Bey responded by saying: **"We are happy with the rule of Bey Ahmed...Aren't you, like us, subordinate to the Caliph of Istanbul...And if we were called upon to choose a master other than the legitimate Sultan, then we would, frankly, be occupied by the French"**. Although the Beys of Tunisia pretended to be subservient to Turkey, their submission to European countries was astonishing. This Bey Hussein (1824-

1835) approached the French consul and said: **“I hope that victory will be for the French nation... even if a hundred decrees come to me from the Ottoman Empire calling on me to oppose France, my ally... and no one is more eager than me to punish its oppressive enemy, the Dey of Algeria...No love for the infidels... because we will be exposed to their attacks and you will not be able to do anything to protect us”**. (Amirawi, op.cit p 69)

Furthermore, *Hadj Ahmed Bey* complained to the *Beys of Tunis* about the defection of some of his followers who sought refuge in Tunisia. In one letter, he expressed his frustration over the betrayal of *Arch al-Jawameh*, who had taken shelter under Tunisian authority. In an attempt to regain the trust of tribal leaders who had lost confidence in him, *Hadj Ahmed Bey* sought to win them over by offering guarantees of safety. This is evident in one of his letter:

“Our son, Sidi Ahmed bin Suleiman, has informed us that Ahmed bin Abdul Wahid is afraid of us. Let him not fear or worry, for he is granted full protection... Send him to us so he may serve as the mediator between us... This is a secret and must be kept confidential. Send us Ibn Abdul Wahid so he may come to us with your news, and he will return to you with our responses”. (Mudhakirāt Ahmad Bāy, 1973 pp 22–23)

However, the movements of the tribes and the *Bey of Tunis*’s appeals to them, *Hadj Ahmed Bey* actively sought to awaken tribal consciousness and mobilize them as a united front against the occupier. His efforts led him as far as the Tunisian border in hopes of uniting the tribes for a large-scale attack against the enemy. Additionally, after the fall of Constantine in **1837**, *Nuba Tebessa* fled to Tunisia with its leader. Meanwhile, *Mohammed Barbouch* arrived from the Tunisian city of *Le Kef* to *Tebessa*, where he imposed a heavy fine on the local population in the name of the *Bey of Tunis*. (Castal, 2010. p180)

5. The French Occupation’s Stance on Tribal Movements Between Eastern Algeria and Tunisia

5.1 The French Occupation and the Annexation of the Nuhd Tribe to Algeria

In December 1837, a discussion took place between the *Bey of Tunis*, *Ahmed Bey*, and the French Consul regarding the *Nuhd* tribe. This tribe, originally from the *Jebel Béja* region, was divided into two branches: one affiliated with Algeria and the other with Tunisia. The Tunisian-affiliated branch, *Nuhd*, was located near *Fort La Calle (El Kala)*. The French authorities in the region sought to annex the tribe and take control of its land, aiming to unite the entire tribe under their administration. However, *Ahmed Bey* strongly

opposed this move and wrote to the French Consul, urging him to put an end to the matter.

In response, the French Consul conveyed the official stance of his government, stating that *France was willing to grant Tunisia an alternative piece of land in exchange for the lands of the Nuhd tribe*, once the border between Algeria and Tunisia had been formally demarcated.

Upon receiving this response, *Ahmed Bey of Tunis* found himself facing a power imbalance, recognizing the strength of France and the relative weakness of his own position. Nevertheless, he sent a letter wrote on the 8th of Dhu al-Hijjah in the year 1253, corresponding to March 5, 1838, in which he asserted:

“As for what follows, we have received your letter with the permission that came to you from the side of the French state regarding Nuhad, and you mentioned that when Algeria settled in the hands of the French, all of its rights were returned to them... The answer is: These Nuhad did not receive the patronage of Algeria previously, nor did the Turkish state in Algeria speak to Tunisia regarding them, despite the wars that took place between them. Rather, they are the subjects of Tunisia, and its kings are deliberating on disposing of them and getting rid of them, succeeding their predecessors. ...And the limits of our employment are the disposal of it, as we found before us. We did not exceed it. As for renewing the definition or replacing some of the labor with a portion of others, it is known that we depend on advice from the Ottoman Empire, and if we have the general disposition of the transfer according to what our diligence requires for the benefit, then reducing it or replacing some of it is not good for us without informing our Lord, the Sultan... and there is no addition except goodness and well-being.” (Ibn Abī al-Ḍiyāf, op.cit. pp 18-19)

Here are the main points to take away from the letter that the Bey of Tunis sent to France:

1. The Bey of Tunis wanted to show the French authority in Algeria that this tribe did not constitute a point of contention between the two provinces, and that Algeria had not previously claimed it, besides that he stressed that they were a care for Tunisia.
2. He considered the Nuhd tribe to be affiliated with the province of Tunisia, and the evidence is that taxes were taken from it. This was expressed in the term “salvation,” meaning tax extraction.

3. Ahmed Bey of Tunis wanted to inform France that he had powers in his state and that he should obtain the sultan's mandate as a legal supporter and a barrier to the Western powers. (Ben Tāher, 2008. p38)

5.2 Drawing the Borders

The inhabitants of the border region in the Upper Steppes and the areas around Tebessa remained in constant contact. However, in 1845, French forces under General Randon, commander of the Annaba region, launched a military campaign to organize the lands of the Hanencha tribe and the southeastern section of the region, including Tebessa. This campaign aimed to establish fixed borders with Tunisia, tracing a line from Mount Frema in the Medjerda region to Tebessa. (Castal, op.cit p184) In the summer of 1848, the French launched a comprehensive attack on the border population groups, which eventually led to the Bey of Tunisia agreeing to demarcate the borders.

It is noteworthy that General Randon corresponded with Tunisian authorities, informing them of his movements in the border region. In one letter, he wrote: *“Sir Saleh bin Mohammed, peace be upon you... I inform you that I am in Tebessa... and I am proceeding to follow the borders between the French state and the Tunisian state to understand the situation well... I do not wish for my soldiers to harm the Arabs, damage their crops, or take their livestock. My intention is only for the good of my country, and likewise, I seek only goodness and peace for yours... I ask you to inform the tribes under your authority who are near the border and to send someone on your behalf to maintain peace between us”* (Tunisian Archive, Box No. 213, File 245, Document 158.).

From this message, it is clear that General Randon wanted to inform the Tunisians that he had traveled to Tebessa to track the borders and study the region, particularly the situation of the border tribes. He emphasized that he was accompanied by French troops but did not intend to harm the Arabs, their crops, or livestock. He also requested that the local tribes be informed to prevent any clashes.

The attack began with the border tribe of Ouled Ali, demanding their submission and obedience. Some documents indicate that the campaign also aimed to pursue Hassnaoui, the rebellious leader of the Hanencha tribe, who had taken refuge in Tunisian territory. Others suggest that the attack was meant to punish the Tunisian tribes that had sheltered Hanencha fugitives escaping French rule (Ben Slimane, 2009 p286). In October 1843, the Bey's official

representative was informed that the borders, as envisioned by Randon, included:

"The Hanencha region, Wadi Serat, and Mellegue up to Ouled Ali... extending precisely to the Nehd tribe, annexing them all to the western province, including the Hanencha around Serat and Mellegue, incorporating all of Ouled Boughanem and some of the Wargha tribe, about half of them from Charen" (al-Ḥabāshī, 2016 p. 290.)

5.3 French Topographical Work

Between 1842 and 1845, the French conducted topographical surveys, leading to the creation of a map approved by Ahmed Bey of Tunisia in 1846 during his visit to Paris. These borders were based on markers placed by General Randon between 1844 and 1846. (Rā'īsī, 2016, pp. 40–41.)

By establishing these borders, the French colonial administration aimed to restrict the movements of Algerian tribes while intimidating Tunisian tribes to prevent them from aiding Algerian fugitives or resistance fighters. In reality, the French at that time did not distinguish between Algerians and Tunisians within the homogeneous tribal society. Many Algerian resistance fighters often retreated to Tunisia, which led the French to consider them as Tunisians. (Pierre, op.cit p 188)

In this context, a letter from the French military governor in Annaba, General Randon, to Saleh bin Mohammed in Tunisia stated:

"I am in the Tebessa region in Algeria, leading my military forces on a mission in the border area to inspect its markers, study its terrain, and understand its people. I am a peaceful man, fair and just, and I do not intend to harm the local inhabitants or destroy their crops and properties. Therefore, I ask you to inform the people not to fear my forces and not to initiate gunfire against my soldiers. If they do, my troops will retaliate, leading to conflict between both sides and damaging relations between the two states".(Tunisian Archive, op.cit, document 158)

6. French Colonial Strategy for Border Protection

6.1 Cooperation with Tunisian Officials

Following Randon's attempts to establish the border, contacts took place between French officers and Tunisian workers about border control, and this is what we find in one of the letters of the military governor in Watan al-Hanancha

to Saleh bin Muhammad, the priest of Watan al-Kaf, which is found in the documents of the Tunisian archives, where he refers to:

“...The families expelled by Tunisian military units from Tunisian lands have arrived in Algerian territory. These families belong to the Ouled Yahia tribe in Algeria. They had fled their homeland and sought refuge in Tunisia. The French officer requested the Tunisian leader to coordinate efforts in monitoring the border region.” (Tunisian Archive, op.cit, Document 171)

6.2 Directing Military Campaigns to the Border Region

From this, we find that a French unit headed to the border region and entered Tunisian territory, landed in Kadia El-Zeitoun, while the Tunisian citizens feared the French and fled their lands. (Ibid, document 174).

In a letter to Saleh bin Mohammed, the Amir Alay (military commander) of El Kef, the French military governor stated that he had dispatched French forces to the border to pursue rebellious tribes and prevent them from fleeing into Tunisia. Among these tribes were the Ouled Yahia, who had settled in the territory of Ouled Boughanem within Tunisia. The French officer requested that the Tunisian leader communicate with the local tribes to expel them from Tunisia and force them to return to Algeria. (Ibid, document 172).

6.3 Construction of Military Outposts

The French authorities built military posts along the border to monitor movements. The Tunisian government received reports that the French had established a military base on the Algeria-Tunisia border, which it regarded as an encroachment on its territorial rights. (Ibid, document 176).

Additionally, the French sought to control the movement of the Nememcha tribe, who had settled in Tunisian border areas such as Oued Al-Drias, Kef Al-Kaskasi, Al-Ahaseer, and Al-Farid and others. (Ibid, document 187).

Furthermore, Tunisian witnesses in the border region testified before the judge in Beja that the French were contacting local Tunisians, pressuring or enticing them to sell their lands. They also recruited informants to provide intelligence on the tribes residing in the border areas, including population statistics. Some French individuals entered Tunisian territory under the pretense of searching for minerals and precious stones. (Ibid, document n°188).

7. CONCLUSION

This study leads to several key conclusions:

- ✓ The administrative borders that Ahmed Bey attempted to safeguard, under the influence of the Dey of Algiers and the Beys of Tunis, had been outlined since the 17th century north of Oued Serat. However, areas south of it, particularly the central-western and southwestern regions, were not formally delineated. Consequently, the boundary remained fluid, expanding or retracting based on the strength of the tribes—until the arrival of French colonial rule.
- ✓ Ahmed Bey adopted a strategy of flexibility and conciliation with the tribes of the Eastern Beylik, aiming to bring them back under his control and rally them against French colonial expansion.
- ✓ The annexation of the Nedd tribe by the French provoked a dispute with the Bey of Tunis, who asserted that the tribe belonged to Tunisia and that incorporating it into Algeria was a violation of Tunisian borders—an issue he believed warranted Ottoman intervention.
- ✓ The French colonial administration in Algeria actively pursued Algerian tribes that had fled to Tunisia and retaliated against Tunisians who had aided them.
- ✓ General Randon worked to delineate the Algeria-Tunisia border to prevent Algerian tribes from migrating to Tunisia and to separate the Algerian and Tunisian tribes.
- ✓ The French occupation authorities exacerbated tensions between Algerian and Tunisian border tribes, forcing the Tunisian government to accept French intervention to mediate conflicts and agree to formal border demarcation.
- ✓ The French played a pivotal role in defining the borders, sending representatives to conduct topographical surveys, which ultimately led to the creation of a map approved by Ahmed Bey of Tunisia in 1846.

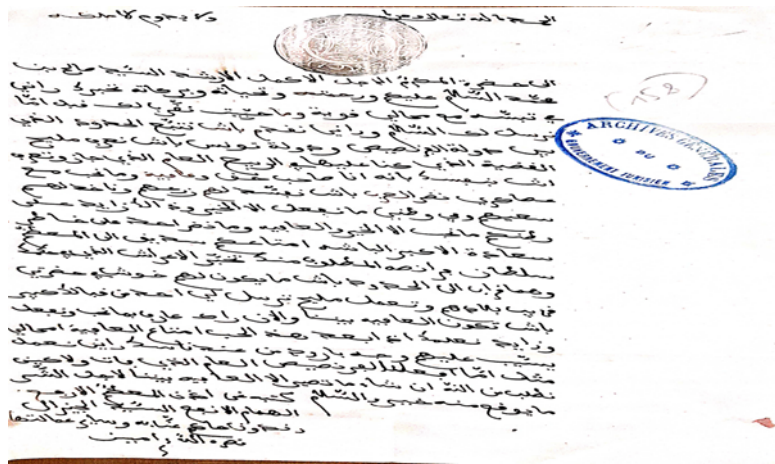
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9. Appendices

Fig.1. Letter from General Randon to Saleh bin Muhammad in Tunisia



Duplicate

“... al-sayyid Ṣāliḥ ibn Muḥammad, al-salām ‘alaykum... nukhbiruka rāni fī Tībissa... wa-rāni naqdīm natba‘ al-ḥudūd bayna dawlat al-farnṣīs (kadhā) wa dawlat Tūnis bāsh na‘rif mlīḥ al-qaḍiyya... wa mā naḥibb ma‘aṣākīrī naḍḍar al-‘Arab bāsh nafsīd-lhum zar‘hum wa nākhudh-lhum sa‘yhum, wa fī waṭanī mā naf‘al illā al-khayr, wa dhālik zād ‘alā waṭankum, wa mā naḥibb illā al-khayr wa al-‘āfiya, wa dhālik zāyid ‘alā waṭankum, mā naḥibb ghayr al-khayr wa al-‘āfiya... al-maṭlūb mink tukhibbir al-a‘rāsh allatī fī ḥukmik wa hum qarīb ilā al-ḥudūd... wa ta‘mil mlīḥ tursil lī aḥad min qibālik bāsh takūn al-‘āfiya baynanā...”

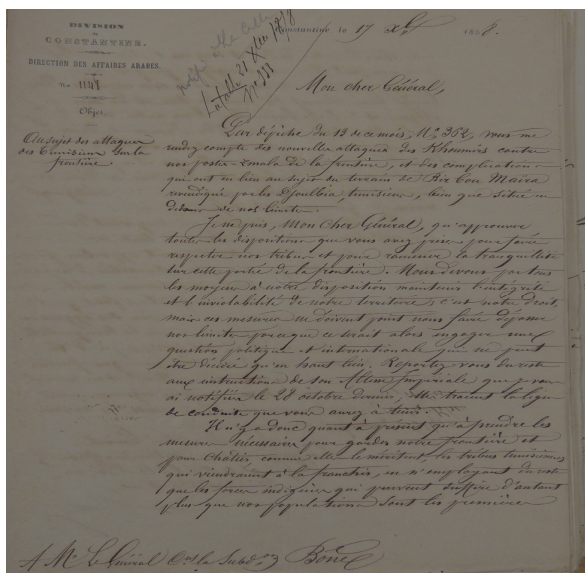
Source: (Tunisian Archive, op.cit, document 158)

Fig.2. Map of the Algerian and Tunisian borders (2nd edition). 1881.



Source: <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb40675564s>, Éditeur : Andriveau-Goujon (Paris)

Fig.3. Correspondence regarding attacks by Tunisians on the border April 17, 1858



Duplicate

« Mon cher Général,

Par dépêche du 13 de ce mois, N° 332, vous me rendez compte des nouvelles attaques des Khoumirs contre nos postes-zmalas de la frontière, et des complications qui ont eu lieu au sujet du terrain de Bir Bou Maïza revendiqué par les Djoulbïa tunisiens, bien que situé en-dehors de nos limites. Je me puis, Mon Cher Général, qu'approuver toutes les dispositions que vous avez prises pour faire respecter nos tribus et pour ramener la tranquillité sur cette partie de la frontière. Nous devons par tous les moyens à notre disposition maintenir l'intégrité et l'inviolabilité de notre territoire ; c'est notre droit, mais ces mesures ne doivent point nous faire dépasser nos limites parce que ce serait alors engager une question politique et internationale qui ne peut être décidée qu'en haut lieu. Reportez-vous en suite aux instructions de Son Altesse Impériale que je vous ai notifiées le 28 octobre dernier, elles traitent de la ligne de conduite que vous aurez à tenir. Il n'y a donc quant à présent qu'à prendre les mesures nécessaires pour garder notre frontière et pour châtier comme elles le méritent les tribus tunisiennes qui viendraient à la franchir, en n'employant à cet égard les forces indigènes qui peuvent souffrir d'autant plus que nos populations sont les premières. »

Source: ANOM FR 30 K 113 Division de Constantine Subdivision de Bone, Affaires Tunisiennes, Correspondances Arrivee n°1574.