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## The Essence of Existence and Peace: Emir Abdelkader's Journey in Manifesting the Human Condition

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### Abstract:

Emir Abdelkader's persona exudes a sublime humanitarian spirit that transcends narrow allegiances. He regarded all people as servants of God, whether they were his subjects or even the French colonizers. He recognized that the French did not come to Algeria as refugees in need of aid, but as invaders seeking to seize power; thus, his struggle was not driven by enmity, but rather by the futility of extending benevolence under such circumstances.

Rejecting all forms of violence and bloodshed, he resorted to military action only after repeated peaceful endeavors had failed. His confrontation with the French was not an end in itself, but a means to achieve lasting peace.

His noble ethics shone through in his treatment of prisoners. Rather than viewing them as defeated foes, he treated them as honored guests deserving of respect and care—even going so far as to summon a Christian priest to offer prayers for his Christian captives. This gesture embodied his broad religious and humanitarian vision.

Emir Abdelkader embraced dialogue with those of differing faiths, firmly believing that the divinely revealed religions originate from the same source, sharing common foundations while differing only in their outward expressions. Despite enduring personal suffering and exile, he harbored no malice toward Christians; indeed, he defended their rights and protected them, as evidenced by his advocacy on behalf of the persecuted Christians of Damascus.

Through such exalted conduct, his legacy ascends to the realm of the highest moral virtues, standing as a timeless symbol of peace and justice.

**Keywords:** The Humanitarian Stance; Tolerance; Peace; Dialogue; Peaceful Coexistence.

### Introduction:

For centuries, Algerians lived under political turmoil and deteriorating internal security, a result of the extended Turkish rule, which created a gradual deterioration of the national structure. With their departure, the dawn of French colonialism began, exploiting its ambitions to seize land and identity. Amid these turbulent historical transformations, the light emerged through Muhyiddin's

decision to entrust leadership to a person of sound health and solid mental capacity. He presented his son, Emir Abdelkader, as a symbol of noble morals and sublime humanity.

Here emerges the profound philosophical dilemma that has long preoccupied political and moral thought: How can a warlord embody the standards of peace and mercy in the face of colonial violence? Emir Abdelkader, who was elevated by a humanist philosophy inspired by Islamic teachings and an open-minded upbringing, displayed a striking contradiction. He advocated good morals and principles of peace in dealing with his subjects, even with those he considered adversaries, without denying the necessity of resorting to violence when peace efforts failed and were betrayed by the tolerance exploited by the French colonizers. This study seeks to explore several central hypotheses: First, that Emir Abdelkader was not merely a warlord, but was capable of striking a balance between force and mercy, adhering to sublime religious values rooted in Islamic thought. Second, that his firm stance in calling for dialogue and reconciliation, even with the French, was the product of a philosophical vision that believes every human being has the right to dignity, regardless of affiliation. Through the research outline, we will also examine his humane treatment of his subjects and his desire to reach a peace that ensures the preservation of the nation's identity, in addition to his philosophical dimension, which was clearly evident in his relations with certain French powers, manifested in the peace treaty of the sixties.

This begins a research journey that poses profound questions about the nature of humane leadership and how peace can emerge from the womb of violence in the face of colonialism. Emir Abdelkader thus emerges as an enduring symbol of the philosophy of peace in the face of violence.

### **1-The Essence of Forgiveness: The Existential Manifestation of Emir Abdelkader's Peace with the French**

Emir Abdelkader stands out as a symbol of sublime humanism, even in his confrontation with the French colonizers. His vision of humanity embodies the spirit of mercy and compassion in all circumstances, whether in times of victory or defeat. He viewed all human beings as servants of God, a principle reflected in his speeches and discussions with the occupying leaders. One of his philosophical discussions read:

"If we had known that your homeland was too small for you and you came to us asking for space so you could live with us, we would not have hesitated to give you a land that would accommodate you and shelter you next to us. The land is God's land, and you are God's servants. But you came as invaders and occupiers, and this is what obligated us to defend our homeland with all weapons." (Ashrati Suleiman, 2009: 46)

This makes it clear that his humanity was not limited to victory or defeat, but rather was a constant pillar in his dealings with everyone. He was not satisfied with the French coming to Algeria with the intention of aggression and destruction, although he would have welcomed them if they came seeking to help his people and build a collaborative civilization.

Emir Abdelkader paved the way for peace. His eagerness to convey his peaceful vision reached its peak when he wrote to the Queen of France, appealing to her to intervene with her husband as a symbol of compassion and a rejection of aggression. In these letters, he expressed his hope of seeing the French come to his homeland not as combatants, but as partners in building a civilization based on the values of humanity and compassion, although all his correspondence remained unanswered.

His attempts were not limited to official correspondence; he even wrote to the wife of the King of France, believing that her compassionate presence could serve as a bridge to convey a message of peace and cooperation, emulating in this the generosity of women who embody the emotion that rejects conflict and fighting. (Al-Arabi Ismail, d. (s.): 186.)

His humanity was evident in the deepest moments of the conflict, when he was fighting the French on his homeland. He sent a group of goats to some priests, expressing his willingness to offer a helping hand in their humanitarian and charitable mission. This priest had established an orphanage where he housed Algerian children, highlighting how the Emir transcended the boundaries of religious and political affiliation and treated others from a position of pure human brotherhood. (Ashrati Suleiman, 2009: 247)

Although this priest was French, Emir Abdelkader did not hesitate to provide him with assistance, demonstrating that his humanitarian vision transcended the demands of war and revenge, forming a comprehensive vision based on dialogue and humanity in the most difficult circumstances.

## **2-The Essence of Generosity: The Existential Manifestation of the Emir's Treatment of Prisoners:**

Emir Abdelkader is a symbol of the noble humanitarian philosophy, as his treatment of prisoners of war embodied an approach based on the loftiness of Islamic principles and morals, as his humanitarian instincts were not limited to times of victory, but extended to include the deepest moments of defeat and injustice. The Emir was keen to strictly implement the laws of war in Islam, which led him to vehemently refuse to slip into the trap of brutality and revenge. In this context, one historian says: "Historians, both foreign and loyal, unanimously agree that Emir Abdelkader's behavior was characterized by chivalry, pride, and humanity. He forbade, under penalty of punishment, beheading or any other brutal acts, even though his enemies were committing them... However, Emir Abdelkader strictly adhered to the laws of war in Islam. All prisoners would tremble with fear upon arriving at his camps, but they would soon be surprised by the Algerian fighter's humanity, good treatment, and generosity. The behavior of the invaders, however, was the complete opposite" (Badiaa Hassani al-Jazairi, 2002: 56). This commitment was not limited to showing a compassionate face upon arrival at the camps. It extended to his concern to preserve the dignity of those whose ranks had been mingled with the blood of the enemy and the blood of the innocent. The Emir pledged not to touch the bodies of French dead, refused to torture the French people, and ordered that unarmed Frenchmen not be fought, believing that humanity knew no bounds between combatant and prisoner.

On the other hand, Emir Abdelkader demonstrated a profound sense of the human dignity of women. He sensed that seeing women as captives left a deep moral wound in his conscience. On one occasion, when the cavalry of one of his successors brought him four girls as booty, he turned away in disgust and sarcastically said, "Lions attack strong animals, but jackals attack the weak ones." (Henry Churchill, 2009: 263)

His concern was not limited to verbal protection. He acknowledged the importance of preserving the dignity of prisoners in every detail of their treatment, even issuing an official decree requiring them to be treated with kindness. This is confirmed by the following incident:

"After the decree was published, Emir Abdelkader learned that one of his regular soldiers had been caught with the head of a Frenchman in his hand... He stood surrounded by his military and civilian commanders, and the perpetrator was bound forward. The Frenchman's head was placed before the Sultan. Abdelkader then asked the prisoner:

-Was the owner of this head dead or alive before his head was cut off?

-Dead.

"Then you will be flogged with two hundred and fifty lashes for disobeying my orders. This punishment will teach you that it is cowardly and cruel to mutilate a dead person, since he is no longer anyone's enemy." (Henry Churchill, 2009: 269)

By this resolute action, the Emir was only demonstrating his commitment to ensuring that benevolence and justice are inseparable partners. He severely punished one of his soldiers who had assaulted the body of a deceased Frenchman, emphasizing that violating human dignity is a betrayal of the principles upon which the right to peace is based.

The Emir was also keen to instill this principle in the hearts of his men, addressing them, "Every Arab who keeps a Frenchman or a Christian in his possession must be responsible for the way he treats him..." He indicated that any abuse committed against prisoners would result in those exploiting them being deprived of their due reward. This contrasts starkly with the behavior of the French occupiers, who practiced extreme brutality in their treatment of their captives. (Bruno It is important to note his speeches to the French, which reflected his firm belief that humanity is a bridge for communication and dialogue. In one of his speeches, he said: "We never discriminated between the prisoners and our men regarding food and shelter. As soon as we saw that among the prisoners were men of rank and honor who disdained the resort to flight, we distinguished them from the others according to their needs. They were grateful, and we proposed their release. Commander Connior is aware of all the arrangements being made for their release. He also knows that we received no response to our letters, and that the mocking silence was the reason for the severing of understanding between us and you." (Bruno Etienne, 2001: 304)

For Emir Abdelkader, the treatment of prisoners was not merely a strategic decision, but rather a reflection of a philosophical vision based on the sanctification of human dignity. He would bring in a priest to lead prayers for the prisoners and ensure that they were treated equally to his soldiers. He showed great concern for providing them with adequate food and shelter, even if this meant giving up surplus resources for those most in need.

The spirit of cooperation and cultural dialogue was evident in his letters to Queen Amélie, in which he called on them to form an alliance to build a civilization based on cooperation between peoples, far removed from the spirit of conquest and selfishness that dominated French thought at the time. (Boutaleb Abdelkader, 2009: 105, 106)

The prince did not hesitate to support science and language learning as a means of rapprochement between civilizations. He allowed the teaching of Arabic to Germans who wished to study it, emphasizing that the exchange of knowledge is one of the pillars of openness and dialogue between peoples. (Johann Karl Berndt, 2009: 152)

His educational policies played an effective role in spreading knowledge, as he allocated funds to support students and zawiya sheikhs and to sponsor religious and cultural institutions. This demonstrates his commitment to building a bridge of knowledge and culture that transcended the boundaries of hostility and conflict. (Al-Rassi George, 2008: p. 34)

In exile, despite Napoleon's offer of a monthly stipend sufficient for luxury, Emir Abdelkader chose to allocate a portion of it to meet the needs of those who stood by him, thus emphasizing that personal well-being is no substitute for the human spirit that engages with the suffering of others. (Ashrati Suleiman, 2009: 347, 348)

In conclusion, we cannot fail to mention that Emir Abdelkader's influence by Sufism lent his personality a unique spiritual dimension. He viewed every creature as a servant of God, and that piety transcended human reason to become a reference for compassionate interaction with all. (Ashrati Suleiman, 2009: 46)

With these deeply rooted practices and orientations, Emir Abdelkader remains an enduring example of a sublime humanitarian philosophy, where the principles of benevolence were combined



with a strict commitment to preserving dignity, making him a role model for treating prisoners and enemies alike in a time when the clutches of violence and injustice were intensifying.

### **3-Harmony of Existence: The Emir's Existential Manifestation of the Dialogue and Coexistence of Civilizations:**

Emir Abdelkader believes that the differences between religions are merely a manifestation of the multiplicity of means by which man expresses his highest values. He believes that the Islamic religion encompasses the ideas of all religions, crowned with the spirit of the Oneness of the Creator. In this regard, he says: "The Muhammadan religion encompasses everything that is dispersed among religions and laws. Just as Christ, peace be upon him, said: 'I did not come to abolish the Torah, but I came to complete it,' so too did Muhammad, peace be upon him: he did not come to abolish the Torah and the Gospel, but he came to complete them. The Torah came with the retaliation of a life for a life, and the Gospel came with forgiveness: 'If your brother slaps you on the left cheek, offer him your right cheek.' The Qur'an came with retribution, saying: 'Retaliation is prescribed for you in cases of murder,' and with forgiveness, saying: 'But whoever pardons and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah...' (Emir Abdelkader, d. (S): 188, 18). Thus, the divine religions complement each other. Jesus, peace be upon him, affirmed what was stated in the Torah, adding new insights, and Islam affirmed what was stated in the Torah and the Bible, recognizing the prophethood of Moses and Jesus, peace be upon them. While the two religions share concepts of tolerance and human brotherhood, as expressed in the Bible: "If your brother slaps you on the left cheek, offer him your right," Islam phrases it as: "But whoever pardons and makes peace, his reward is due from God," adding what enriches the meanings of noble morals in the words of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him: "I was sent to perfect noble morals." It is worth noting that the Emir's humanitarian inclinations were the primary motivation for his acceptance of interfaith dialogue, without being rigid in narrow religious fanaticism.

Emir Abdelkader was reconciled with all religions, even with Christianity, which represented the identity of the French colonizer. As Mr. Fouad Saleh says: "Anyone who contemplates the religious tolerance that Emir Abdelkader was known for during his time in Algeria and abroad in exile will realize that the man was at a level of human awareness, understanding the truth of man and humanity, which does not believe in borders, barriers, and obstacles between people. The best evidence of this is his statement in the Madeleine Church in France when he was in exile... He said: When I began my resistance to the French, I thought they were a people without religion, but my mistake became clear, and in any case, churches like this will convince me of my error" (Mr. Fouad Saleh, 1985: 117). The Emir's humanitarian inclinations were also evident in his efforts to quell the 1960s unrest from its inception, before it extended to fourteen days. He resorted to peaceful and diplomatic means, scrupulously protecting the innocent. He sought the assistance of the Turkish governor, Ahmed Pasha, and Emir Abdelkader left no stone unturned. He met with the notables, addressing them: "Religions, foremost among them Islam, are too noble and sacred to be a dagger of ignorance. I warn you against allowing the devil of ignorance to have a share in your midst." The Emir then gathered Moroccan men and sent them to Christian neighborhoods to repel the attackers and call them to reason. He opened his home to fleeing Christians... As the chapters of this tragedy came to an end, the Emir and his aides were able to save fifteen thousand people belonging to the Eastern Church... from death" (Ben Sebaa Abdelkader, d (s): 57, 58)

It was from this perspective that the Emir called for coexistence between religions and peoples. He strove to prevent the outbreak of sectarian strife before it occurred. He addressed the Turkish governor, asking for help, and addressed the Muslims of Damascus, urging them to desist from their

immoral actions. He rushed to rescue the Christians, continuing to support the oppressed and save them from the tragedies of murder. It is narrated that "Emir Abdelkader remained for fourteen days to support the oppressed and save them from murder. He supervised the treatment of the wounded and offered condolences to the bereaved, widows, and orphans. He spent most of his nights awake, holding his rifle in his hand, out of concern for those under his protection. When drowsiness overcame him, he would rest his head against the muzzle and fall asleep. The number of those Emir Abdelkader saved from those who had sought refuge with him reached approximately fifteen thousand people, including prominent Christians and monks... A group of Christians asked him to secure their way to Beirut, and he did so" (Ibadah Nizar, 1994: 17). The Emir was characterized by a comprehensive vision that transcended the boundaries of ethnic or religious affiliation. He took care of the Christians who were persecuted in Damascus, demonstrating that he was neither an unjust nor a spiteful Algerian with a vengeful bent. His humanity was also evident in the peace treaty of the sixties, when he attempted to reunite the inhabitants of Mount Lebanon, who, despite their geographical unity, were at odds over religious differences. However, the Emir's objective and humane spirit was instrumental in halting this conflict, rejecting conflict regardless of its diverse parties, preferring to preserve human blood.

In one of his responses to the letters of thanks he received, Emir Abdelkader emphasized: "What you have heard from us and accepted from us regarding the protection of the People of the Covenant and the defense of yourselves and your honor to the best of your ability and effort is—as your noble knowledge indicates—a requirement of the commands of the Sunni Sharia and human chivalry. Our Sharia is the perfect complement to noble morals, encompassing all the praiseworthy virtues that foster harmony... and oppression in all religions is reprehensible and its perpetrator is despicable" (Ben Sebaa Abdelkader, d. (s.): 58).

His stance was not merely a reaction to the suffering of the innocent; rather, it was a true embodiment of the highest Islamic values, which call for the protection of the oppressed and the honoring of non-Muslims. The Emir received accolades and acclaim from various segments of the world, from Muslims and Turks to non-Muslims and the French. This confirmed that his leadership was not derived solely from narrow political objectives, but was based on moral virtues emanating from the spirit of Islam and the values of Algerian society. Perhaps the most striking confirmation of his humanity was his steadfast stance during war and major trials. He did not harm the elderly or children, thus establishing the modern Algerian state. This came about only after tremendous efforts, combining knowledge and action to modernize the corrupt reality left behind by Turkish rule. It is also narrated that he "headed to Istanbul, leaving Damascus on the 27th of Dhu al-Qi'dah, and stayed there for two months. He visited Sultan Abd al-Aziz and mediated with him to pardon the prisoners and exiles convicted in the Sixty-Day Revolt. He was awarded the Ottoman Medal of the First Class. He then traveled to Paris, his goal being to calm tensions after the revolt. He then returned to Paris, where he visited the Palace of Versailles and viewed photographs of the French wars between him and France, depicting his opponents' victories over him. He asked the palace director, 'Why didn't you include the photographs of the wars in which your armies were defeated?' The director laughed and remained silent" (Ibadah Nizar, 1994: 27). The prince's role was not limited to rescuing Christians; he also sought to reconcile the hearts of Muslims and Christians, thereby confirming that the West's misapprehension of Islam stems from an ignorance of its original meanings. He said: "And if God had willed, He could have made you one community, but to test you in what He has given you. So race to [do] good. To God you will all return, and He will inform you concerning that over which you used to differ." (Surat Al-Ma'idah, verse 5).

Emir Abdelkader corrected the false notions that the West had constructed about Islam. While it was accused of being a religion of war or of invasion, he demonstrated that Islam is a religion of peace and mercy, and that the accusations directed at Christians are only part of the distorted image painted by history. In a stark example, when the head of Mustafa ibn Ismail was presented to him, he said: "There is no power or strength except with God. To God we belong and to Him we shall return." He ordered the head to be buried to prevent misrepresentation, shocking the French at the loss of a loyal ally. (Belkhoja Amar, d. (s.): 60)

Hence, Emir Abdelkader's humanity is evident in his letter to the French government after the fall of the monarchy, where he said: "Even if you resent the wars that took place between me and you, which lasted for several years, I do not think that anyone on earth would deny or criticize me for them, because I am a man whose religion obligates me to defend it and the land of its people, who cling to its firm bond. So I did so, and I exerted all my efforts in this regard as much as I could" (Bouzaziz Yahya, 1964: 75).

Emir Abdelkader's adherence to religious and humanitarian principles was not motivated by personal or political interests; rather, it was a sincere call to defend the homeland and human rights. He took up arms to expel the colonizer, not for revenge. He believed that the people are the true masters, as he aspired to build a state based on justice and dignity, and he urged his people to fulfill their pledges and remain united in the face of betrayal. He also affirmed, "Emir Abdelkader pledged to the Lord of the Worlds to wage jihad and resist evil and injustice" (Bouaziz Yahya, 1964: 75).

His achievements were not limited to the arenas of war and struggle, but extended to diplomatic and educational fields. He concluded clear treaties with the French, appointed ambassadors to represent him abroad, and issued laws for the care of prisoners, preceding the provisions of the Geneva Convention by many years. This is exemplified by the phrase:

"The Emir gave instructions to care for prisoners and not leave them vulnerable to kidnapping by those collaborating with the enemy. His policy placed great importance on the exchange of prisoners, a constitutional right in all wars" (Badia Hassani al-Jazairi, 2002: 9).

The Emir's Sufi leanings are also evident in the world of literature, as verses from his poems affirm the unity of the divine religions. Sometimes he appears as an ascetic Muslim, sometimes he appears as a monk who rushes to churches, and sometimes he studies the Torah in Jewish schools, which indicates his desire to understand others and absorb their true meanings (Emir Abdelkader Al-Jazairi, 2005: 20).

The prince was certain that all religions were revealed by one God, and that there was no difference between them in essence, but rather in formulation and expression. This is concluded with his clear statement: "If Muslims and Christians listened to me, I would resolve the dispute between them, and they would become brothers outwardly and inwardly, but they do not listen to me." (Emir Abdelkader, d. (S): 107)

At the end of the journey, it becomes clear that Emir Abdelkader sought to create peace and dialogue between the followers of the Christian and Muslim faiths, even if this required consensus from both parties, something that was unattainable in light of the sectarian divisions witnessed in Lebanon and Syria. During these critical periods, the Emir played the role of mediator, helping to stop the bloodshed and restore the spirit of love and brotherhood among the people of one nation, as evidenced by his statement: "Serious sectarian incidents occurred in both Lebanon and Syria. While Emir Abdelkader was living in Damascus, he played a significant role in stemming the bloodshed and restoring the spirit of love and brotherhood among the people of one nation. The population of most of Lebanon was divided into three sects: Druze, Christians, and Muslims. The fire of war and



strife erupted among them, lasting for twenty years, then spreading to Syria, devouring wealth and lives. The Emir tried to stop the war with kindness and advice." (Kabir Salima, d. (S): p. 22).

In all his positions, whether in Damascus or during diplomatic negotiations with France, Emir Abdelkader demonstrated his sublime intellect and sublime morals, defying the limits of violence and division, maintaining his pledge of loyalty and honoring it at all times and in all places. In his correspondence and diplomatic activity, he demonstrated a clear vision and a sincere commitment to achieving peace. He exchanged diplomatic representation with the French government and appointed ambassadors to represent him in state affairs, which confirmed his commitment to implementing peace and establishing the foundations of civilized interaction. (Ben Dahah Abdelkader, d. (s.): 131)

### **Conclusion:**

Emir Abdelkader was keen to ensure that the state serves the people and that rights are granted to citizens without discrimination, based on the commands of Sharia and humanity that establish the values of peace and justice. He issued laws stipulating the care of prisoners and ensuring their safety, which far preceded the provisions of the Geneva Convention. His generosity was also evident in his treatment of his French guests. (Badi'a Hassani al-Jaza'iri, 2002: 9). It is clear that Emir Abdelkader, with his sublime humanism and comprehensive religious philosophy, engaged in dialogue with the entire world, even in the face of colonialism, rejecting discrimination and embracing the value of dialogue and coexistence among civilizations. He has always been an example that human struggles are not merely struggles for power, but rather battles for dignity and humanity, making him a role model for generations in the art of confronting injustice with diplomacy and wisdom.

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