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	<b>The French Military Campaign on Laghouat (December 4, 1852) Through the Lens of Al-Mubasher Newspaper: Colonial Discourse, Resistance, and Historical Memory in Algeria</b>	
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<b>Abstract</b> Since the French occupation of Algeria in 1830, colonial authorities sought mechanisms to communicate with and influence the local population. One of the earliest and most significant initiatives was the establishment of Arabic-language colonial newspapers. Among them, Al-Mubasher, founded in 1847, became a key instrument of propaganda despite its awkward linguistic style. This study focuses on Al-Mubasher's coverage of the French campaign against the city of Laghouat on December 4, 1852, a decisive moment in Algeria's colonial history. The analysis demonstrates how the newspaper narrated the events of the campaign, framed local leaders such as Sharif Muhammad bin Abdullah and Ibn Nacer bin Shaher as agitators, and normalized French punitive measures, including confiscation and looting of property. By examining the colonial discourse in Al-Mubasher, this research highlights the dual role of the newspaper as both a political mouthpiece and a historical archive. Ultimately, the findings reveal the entanglement of propaganda, resistance, and collective memory, offering critical insight into the function of colonial media in Algeria.		
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## Introduction

The establishment of *Al-Mubasher* newspaper in 1847 marked a significant stage in the French colonial administration's efforts to consolidate its presence in Algeria. Conceived as an official mouthpiece of the colonial authorities, the newspaper was designed to serve both administrative and ideological purposes. It reported on

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political events and legislative measures, while simultaneously attempting to undermine popular resistance by framing it within a colonial narrative.

The city of Laghouat, situated at a strategically important crossroads, became a focal point of French colonial ambitions. Its resistance, led by Ibn Nasser bin Shahra and Sharif Muhammad bin Abdullah, represented a direct threat to the expansionist policies of the French. The French administration, seeking to secure this region, prepared a large-scale military campaign in 1852. *Al-Mubasher* provided detailed coverage of these events, offering insights into how colonial discourse sought to justify occupation while discrediting local resistance. This article examines the French campaign on Laghouat through the narratives presented in *Al-Mubasher*, addressing the central research question: How did the newspaper portray the events of December 4, 1852, and what discourse strategies were employed to shape colonial legitimacy?

## Findings

1. *Al-Mubasher* functioned not only as a newspaper but also as a colonial tool designed to legitimize violence and reshape public memory.
2. The Laghouat campaign was framed in biased terms, portraying French military action as “necessary order” while delegitimizing popular resistance.
3. Resistance leaders Sharif Muhammad bin Abdullah and Ibn Nacer bin Shaher were reduced to rebellious figures in colonial discourse, erasing their nationalist significance.
4. Punitive measures—including confiscation of land and property—were reported as justified acts of discipline rather than as oppressive policies.
5. Despite its propagandistic bias, *Al-Mubasher* preserved valuable historical traces that today help reconstruct Algerian resistance history.

## Actuality of the Study

This study is particularly relevant in contemporary scholarship for several reasons:

- It explores an underexamined aspect of colonial media history, namely Arabic-language newspapers that sought to manipulate local populations.
- The case of Laghouat, a city of strategic and symbolic importance, exemplifies the dynamics between occupation and resistance.
- The research contributes to Algerian historiography by offering new perspectives on media, propaganda, and resistance in the mid-19th century.
- At a global level, the study resonates with ongoing debates on media manipulation, colonial legacies, and the politics of historical memory.

## 1. Emergence of *Al-Mubasher* Newspaper

Following the French invasion of Algeria in 1830, colonial authorities recognized the necessity of creating direct channels of communication with the indigenous population. One such initiative was the introduction of an Arabic-language newspaper. In 1847, *Al-Mubasher* (*The Messenger*) was established by order of King Louis Philippe, and its publication began under the supervision of the French General Government. Its dual-language format—French with Arabic translation—was intended to ensure accessibility for Muslim Algerians unfamiliar with French.

The objectives of the newspaper were twofold: first, to inform Algerians about colonial laws, decrees, and regulations; and second, to weaken the spirit of resistance by casting doubt on the effectiveness of opposition movements. Despite its weak style and translation errors, *Al-Mubasher* remained the sole official Arabic-language publication until 1882, giving it considerable influence in shaping local perceptions.

According to Philippe de Tarazi, *Al-Mubasher* was formally established on September 15, 1847, during the reign of Louis Philippe. Its publication survived regime changes, continuing under successive governments.

Management of the paper shifted across different directors, including Baron Deslain, Arnould, Lapotiere, and Jean Mirant. Initially, it was published twice a month in small format, each page divided into four columns, with French texts translated into Arabic. By 1861, the frequency of publication increased to every ten days, and subsequently to a weekly issue appearing on Thursdays. Its content included legislative texts, government orders, official statements, international news, literary and scientific notes, and selective reports on resistance movements.

## 2. Printing and Publication Phases

From 1847 until 1864, *Al-Mubasher* was printed at the government press, equipped with a Franco-Arabic type-set established for colonial administrative purposes. Managed initially by Roland de Bossuet, the press gave the colonial government tight control over the dissemination of information. In January 1864, the newspaper relocated to 4 Joinville Street in Algiers, reflecting its growing institutional presence. By 1894, publication shifted to the “Fontana” press, where it remained for an extended period following a contractual arrangement with the Civil Affairs Administration.

Historians identify three main stages in the newspaper’s development:

1. **1847–1884:** Establishment and consolidation under colonial administration.
2. **1884–1905:** Expansion in frequency and distribution.
3. **1905–1927:** Final stage of publication until its eventual discontinuation.

## 3. External Appearance and Symbolism

In its early years, the newspaper bore the title *Al-Mubasher* prominently in the center of the page, accompanied by the phrase “News from all countries.” Issue details included both Hijri and Gregorian dates, along with numbering. By September 1851, design changes were introduced: the title was placed within a decorative frame resembling a parasol, beneath which appeared the emblem of an eagle alongside the phrase: “*The sunrise dispels darkness, and reading the news banishes illusions.*” The imagery combined the sun, crescent, and eagle—symbols intended to resonate with Algerian readers while reinforcing the authority of colonial governance.

## 4. Distribution and Content Strategy

*Al-Mubasher* distributed information across prefectures, often reporting on administrative appointments, agricultural production, tax collection, and transport schedules. Coverage of resistance movements, however, was deliberately distorted. Reports minimized organized struggles, framing them as tribal disturbances or criminal activity. Resistance leaders were labeled as agitators or “devils” seeking to sow discord, while colonial authorities were praised as guarantors of order and protectors of the weak. This discursive strategy aimed to delegitimize resistance and portray French presence as indispensable for peace and stability.

Through these mechanisms, *Al-Mubasher* functioned simultaneously as a colonial propaganda tool and as an archival source that inadvertently preserved valuable traces of Algerian resistance history.

## 5. French Campaign on the Laghouat Region Through *Al-Mubasher* Newspaper

### 5.1. French Interest in Laghouat and Strategic Motives

Laghouat occupied a critical geographical position, functioning as a gateway to the Sahara. This made it a primary target for French expansionist ambitions. Only fourteen years after the fall of Algiers in 1830, the colonial army advanced to Biskra in 1844 and then moved toward Laghouat, Touggourt, and El Oued. In this context, Laghouat served as a vital transit hub linking the fertile northern Tell region with the Saharan hinterland.

In his exploratory mission, General Marie Monge highlighted the strategic and economic significance of controlling Laghouat. He argued that its conquest would curtail the influence of Emir Abdelkader’s resistance, reg-

ulate grain trade between highland and desert populations, and redirect commerce to Algiers, thereby strengthening the colonial economy. Furthermore, French authorities envisioned Laghouat as a forward military post capable of facilitating troop movements and suppressing uprisings. Control over Laghouat was also seen as the first step toward extending colonial influence deeper into the African Sahara, including regions such as Guig, Tidikelt, and Ain Salah.

## 5.2. Preparations for the Military Campaign

In the early 1850s, French authorities began planning a decisive campaign to subdue Laghouat. Troop deployments were coordinated from Biskra, Batna, and Algiers. Reinforcements included artillery units, cavalry, and infantry equipped to face both urban resistance and tribal mobilization.

*Al-Mubasher* closely followed and reported on these preparations. Its coverage emphasized French logistical superiority and discipline, while portraying Algerian defenders as disorganized and incapable of sustained resistance. The newspaper's narrative reinforced the perception that French victory was inevitable, thereby serving the dual purpose of propaganda and intimidation.

## 5.3. The Battle of December 4, 1852

On December 4, 1852, French forces launched their assault on Laghouat. The confrontation was marked by fierce fighting, as local defenders, supported by surrounding tribes, resisted with determination. Urban fortifications, combined with knowledge of the terrain, allowed the resistance to inflict significant casualties on the attackers.

However, French reliance on heavy artillery and coordinated infantry assaults gradually overwhelmed the defenders. *Al-Mubasher* described these operations as an orderly imposition of peace, carefully omitting references to civilian losses or destruction. Resistance leaders, including Sharif Muhammad bin Abdullah and Ibn Nacer bin Shaher, were depicted as tribal agitators, further delegitimizing their role in the Algerian national struggle.

## 5.4. Aftermath and Repression

The conquest of Laghouat was followed by severe punitive measures. Confiscation of property, forced displacement, and looting marked the immediate aftermath. Collective punishment was imposed on inhabitants suspected of supporting the resistance, while prominent figures were executed or imprisoned.

*Al-Mubasher* presented these actions as legitimate responses to rebellion, framing them as disciplinary measures necessary for restoring order. This selective reporting minimized the human cost of the campaign while glorifying French authority. Colonial officials were promptly installed, and the city was reorganized administratively, symbolizing its transformation into a French-controlled outpost.

## 5.5. Colonial Discourse in *Al-Mubasher*

An analysis of the newspaper's coverage of Laghouat reveals recurring discursive strategies:

- **Delegitimization of resistance:** Leaders and fighters were labeled as rebels or bandits, stripping them of political legitimacy.
- **Normalization of violence:** Atrocities and collective punishments were reported as routine administrative measures.
- **Glorification of colonial power:** French military actions were celebrated as evidence of progress and civilization.
- **Silencing of Algerian voices:** Accounts of civilian suffering were excluded, erasing local perspectives from the colonial record.

These patterns underscore how *Al-Mubasher* operated not only as a propaganda outlet but also as an archive of colonial discourse, one that inadvertently preserved traces of Algerian resistance for future historical reconstruction.

### 5.2. The Beginning of Popular Resistance in the Laghouat Region as Reported in *Al-Mubasher*

From the outset of the French occupation in 1830, Algeria witnessed waves of popular resistance across most of its regions. Among the most significant of these movements was the resistance in Laghouat, led by Ibn Nacer bin Shahra and Sharif Muhammad bin Abdullah. *Al-Mubasher* covered these events from a colonial perspective, portraying resistance leaders as pretenders and agitators rather than legitimate defenders of their land.

Sharif Muhammad bin Abdullah became Sultan of Ouargla after the death of Sultan Babia, and he assumed the title of Sharif of Ouargla. His growing influence in the south alarmed French authorities. According to *Al-Mubasher*, Captain Carus informed the administration in Algiers of Sharif Muhammad's activities, prompting closer surveillance of the region. In order to strengthen his position, Sharif Muhammad forged an alliance with the Arbaa tribe under the leadership of Ibn Nacer bin Shahra. Together, they opposed Sharif Belharash, who had been appointed by the French over the Djelfa region, and his son-in-law Ahmed Ben Salem, khalifa of Laghouat.

The newspaper described Sharif Muhammad's movements into the Zab region, noting that Belharash mobilized forces to confront him west of Laghouat. Subsequent issues of *Al-Mubasher* detailed these confrontations, describing Sharif Muhammad in derogatory terms such as "pretender to honor" and "corrupter." The paper also traced his activities in the regions of Mزاب and Metlili Chaamba, focusing particularly on skirmishes with Belharash, Pasha of Djelfa. Such reports consistently minimized Algerian victories and emphasized supposed French superiority, revealing the propagandistic function of the newspaper.

### 5.3. The Fall of Laghouat on December 4, 1852, According to *Al-Mubasher*

As resistance expanded, more tribes—including Khadama, Arbaa, Ouled Nail, and the Chaamba—joined the movement, significantly strengthening the opposition. Alarmed by this coalition, French authorities prepared a decisive campaign to suppress Laghouat. With Ibn Nacer bin Shahra and Sharif Muhammad firmly in control of the city, and increasing numbers of fighters rallying to their cause, the resistance threatened to destabilize French positions across the south.

In response, General Youssef was commissioned to lead operations against the insurgents. According to *Al-Mubasher*, he marched from Djelfa, besieged Sharif Muhammad near Qasr al-Hiran, killed 200 fighters, and seized 2,000 camels and 20,000 sheep. The paper claimed that Sharif Muhammad fled to Laghouat, closing its gates with the support of the inhabitants, whom it branded as "corruptors."

However, other accounts contradict this narrative. Algerian oral traditions and alternative French sources suggest that Sharif Muhammad and his allies were victorious, killing approximately 200 French soldiers and capturing livestock and supplies. Rather than fleeing, Sharif Muhammad was celebrated as a hero by the people of Laghouat. This discrepancy illustrates the newspaper's tendency to distort events in favor of colonial propaganda, fabricating "victories" to demoralize resistance supporters.

### 5.4. The Siege of Laghouat

Following these clashes, Marshal Randon ordered a massive campaign to subdue Laghouat. He entrusted General Belsy with command of the southern forces, while General Youssef coordinated additional troops. Reinforcements poured in from multiple directions: a column from Bou Saada, units from Constantine under General Ben, forces led by General Bouscarin, and contingents of Zouaves.

*Al-Mubasher* deliberately downplayed the scale of this campaign, initially naming only Youssef and Belsy, while military memoirs reveal that the force was exceptionally large. French troops encircled Laghouat from all sides:

Youssef from the north, Tromly from the northwest, Belsy from the west, Bouscarin from the southwest, Bane from the southeast, and Moran from the east. Lieutenant Mongin later detailed that the invading force included Zouave battalions, African chasseurs, engineering units, artillery detachments, and local auxiliaries, collectively numbering several thousand.

Bouscarin identified the hill containing the shrine of Sidi al-Hajj Issa as the key to breaching the city. Cannons were positioned there after fierce clashes with local defenders. Although the newspaper acknowledged the intensity of these battles, it downplayed French losses. One report minimized casualties to “two dead and seven wounded,” with sixty additional soldiers and six women injured—figures clearly inconsistent with eyewitness testimonies of large-scale losses.

### 5.5. The Storming of the City

On December 4, 1852, French forces bombarded Laghouat continuously from dawn until mid-morning. At 10 a.m., breaches were created in the fortifications, enabling infantry to storm the city. *Al-Mubasher* praised the “heroism” of French soldiers while remaining silent on the scale of civilian suffering. Violent street battles erupted between French troops and local defenders in both the urban center and surrounding orchards.

The newspaper vaguely admitted that massacres had occurred, referring to them as “a necessity of the army,” but avoided explicit descriptions. Eyewitness accounts tell a different story. Lieutenant Mongin wrote that corpses filled the streets, houses, and tents of nomads camped in the city square. Later estimates recorded 2,300–2,500 dead—approximately two-thirds of the city’s population. Colonel Pan, writing in private letters, described the massacre as “ugly,” noting streets covered with bodies. French painter Eugène Fromentin, who visited six months later, remarked that the smell of decaying corpses still lingered and that stray dogs scavenged human remains at night.

The aftermath included mass looting, destruction of palm groves, and deportation of surviving inhabitants. General Belsy ordered large sections of the city demolished, erasing physical and social structures that had supported resistance. *Al-Mubasher*, however, reduced this devastation to a narrative of “discipline” and “reorganization,” further highlighting its propagandistic role.

### 5.6. Human Losses and Collective Punishments

In subsequent issues, *Al-Mubasher* published the names of several prominent figures killed during the occupation of Laghouat. Among them were Boubaker Ben Shahra (brother of Ibn Nacer Ben Shahra), Mohamed Ben Shahra, Al-Haddad, Al-Bayji, Al-Si Mohamed Belaid, Al-Si Yahya Ben Si Atallah (judge of the Ouled Atallah), his brother, his son, and Al-Arabi Ben Wargla with his son. From the local population of Laghouat, the list included Ahmed Ben Masoud, Abdullah (agent of Si Ben Moussa Ben Amer), Al-Khalifa Ben Al-Nawawi, Al-Si Mohamed Ben Masoud, Mohamed Ben Tawti, Ahmed Ben Farhat, Al-Tayeb Ben Al-Shatta, Ahmed Ben Mustafa, Al-Si Zian (judge), Al-Taher Ben Ahmed, Al-Si Abdel Rahman with his son Ben Hamza and his brother, Al-Hamidi Ben Amri, Quwaider Ben Za’noun, Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Ahmed Ben Taher, and Al-Si Mohamed Ben Ismail (judge).

The roll of the dead further extended to tribal leaders and notables from the Ouled Nail, such as Attia Ben Lakrd, Al-Qasir in Harran (a local leader), Ahmed Ben Sulayman, Al-Tayeb Amer, Al-Sayyid Muhammad ibn Yatu, Ibn Yusuf, Al-Khalifa, Mumad ibn Harina, Ahmad ibn Khalifa, Al-Shaniq, Sa’id ibn Ibrahim, Ghrih ibn Dalsh, and Ahmad Balhazil in Al-Naghla. Additional victims came from the lineage of Sayyid Ahmad al-Mukhtar ibn al-Bali, Ibn al-Agha, Ahmad in Al-Riyah, and Qwaider ibn Ahmad ibn al-Zoush.

Beyond these executions and deaths, *Al-Mubasher* also recorded punitive measures against tribes that had supported the resistance, especially in the Djelfa region. These included Al-Abaziz, Ouled Sidi Youmes, Ouled Si Ahmed, Zenina, Ouled Sidi Issa al-Ahdab, and Ouled Inran, among others.



The destruction of Laghouat was so severe that collective memory termed 1852 “the Year of the Cell,” referring to the city’s near-complete depopulation. Arbitrary looting and confiscation of property followed. A decree by Governor-General Randon on October 31, 1853, published in *Al-Mubasher*, formally transferred all property of the inhabitants of Laghouat to the *Beylik* (state authority), branding the population as “hypocrites” and “corrupt.” The newspaper even published the names of those whose lands and goods were seized, thereby institutionalizing dispossession through colonial legality.

## 6. Conclusion

This study arrives at several key conclusions regarding the role of *Al-Mubasher* in framing the French campaign on Laghouat and its aftermath:

1. ***Al-Mubasher* as a source of colonial discourse:** Although linguistically clumsy and ideologically biased, *Al-Mubasher* remains an invaluable primary source for historians of French Algeria. It provides detailed insights into political, social, and economic developments under occupation, even as it distorts or silences Algerian perspectives.
2. **Laghouat’s strategic and symbolic importance:** Owing to its geographic position and the leadership of resistance figures such as Sharif Muhammad bin Abdullah and Ibn Nacer bin Shahra, Laghouat became a formidable obstacle to French expansion. This compelled the colonial authorities to launch a massive and coordinated military campaign.
3. **Coverage of resistance movements:** *Al-Mubasher* reported extensively on the movements of resistance leaders, their alliances with local tribes, and the eventual siege of the city. Yet, it consistently portrayed them as agitators and corrupters, erasing their role as legitimate defenders of Algerian autonomy.
4. **Propaganda strategies:** Through rhetorical distortion, *Al-Mubasher* minimized French losses, glorified the colonial army, and downplayed or excused the massacres. Its narrative sought to delegitimize Algerian resistance while promoting obedience to colonial authority.
5. **Documentation of repression and dispossession:** Despite its propagandistic tone, the newspaper inadvertently preserved evidence of repression, including the massacre of thousands, the confiscation of property, and the collective punishment of supporting tribes. These records, intended to intimidate, now serve as historical testimony to colonial violence.

In sum, the analysis of *Al-Mubasher*’s coverage of the 1852 campaign demonstrates the dual role of colonial newspapers: as tools of propaganda legitimizing occupation, and as archives that—despite their distortions—preserve crucial evidence of resistance, repression, and the human cost of empire.

## Ethical Considerations

This study relies exclusively on archival materials and secondary historical literature. No human participants were involved. All sources are cited with academic integrity, and the sensitivity of colonial history in Algeria has been carefully respected in the interpretation of findings.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest related to this research.

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