

The efforts of Bey Mohammed el-Kebir in the second conquest of Oran (1792 CE): A historical study

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Abstract---The liberation of the city of Oran represents one of the most significant historical events that exposed the complexities of the Ottoman–Spanish conflict in the Algerian West during the early modern period. Characterized by a prolonged occupation, repeated attempts at reclamation, and the interplay of military, political, and ideological dimensions, Oran had been under Spanish control since 1509 CE. It remained a formidable strategic stronghold that resisted Ottoman conquest for nearly three centuries. Although the Ottomans achieved a temporary success in reclaiming it in 1708 CE under Governor Mohammed Bekdash, the Spanish reoccupied the city in 1732 CE. In this historical context, Bey Mohammed el-Kebir emerged as one of the most prominent leaders who recognized that the recovery of Oran could not be accomplished through military force alone. It required a comprehensive mobilization strategy involving military reorganization, financial investment, and close coordination with scholarly and religious elites. This strategy was embodied in the establishment of the ribat (a fortified outpost where mujahideen could shelter to confront the enemy) at Jabal al-Ma'ida, which served a dual purpose: providing academic and religious education to students while simultaneously engaging in psychological warfare. By restricting external supplies to the Spanish garrison and undermining their morale, the ribat prepared the ground for the decisive military confrontation. This research paper addresses a central research question: How did the convergence of military, scholarly, and political efforts lead to the final liberation of Oran in 1792 CE? It does so by tracing the sequence of events, analyzing the negotiations between Algiers and Spain, and highlighting the key factors that enabled Bey Mohammed el-Kebir to enter Oran and permanently end the Spanish presence.

Keywords---Oran, Ottoman-Spanish Conflict, Bey Mohammed el-Kebir, Liberation, Second Conquest, Beylik of the West.

How to Cite:

MAHDI, L. (2026). The efforts of Bey Mohammed el-Kebir in the second conquest of Oran (1792 CE): A historical study. *The International Tax Journal*, 53(1), 617–624. Retrieved from <https://internationaltaxjournal.online/index.php/itj/article/view/558>

The International tax journal ISSN: 0097-7314 E-ISSN: 3066-2370 © 2025

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Submitted: 11 June 2025 | Revised: 09 August 2025 | Accepted: 19 November 2025

Introduction

Many local historical sources have documented the second conquest of Oran, an event that marked a pivotal stage in Algerian history during the Ottoman era. The Spanish occupation of Oran lasted nearly three centuries. After capturing the city in 1509 CE, it was temporarily reclaimed in 1708 CE by the Ottoman governor Mohammed Bekdash alongside his son-in-law Uzn Hassan. However, this victory was short-lived, as the Spanish reoccupied Oran in 1732 CE.

Within this context, Bey Mohammed el-Kebir distinguished himself as one of the foremost leaders who played a decisive role in the liberation process. He exerted extraordinary efforts to secure victory by mobilizing military forces, calling the population of the Algerian West to jihad, and equipping the *ribat* with arms and provisions. These efforts culminated in the final liberation of Oran in 1792 CE.

This study is guided by the following key questions: What were the preliminary preparations for the second conquest of Oran? What were the main provisions of the negotiations between Algiers and Spain? In what specific ways did Bey Mohammed el-Kebir contribute to achieving this conquest? The study aims to uncover the circumstances surrounding the second conquest of Oran and to assess the extent of Bey Mohammed el-Kebir's contribution—alongside the scholarly class—in securing this historic victory.

1. The Efforts of Bey Mohammed el-Kebir in the Second Conquest of Oran (1792)

In his travelogue, *The Journey of Mohammed el-Kebir*¹, Bey of the Algerian West, to the Algerian Desert South, Ahmad ibn Hattal notes that Mohammed el-Kebir sought to conquer Oran in 1205 AH / 1791 CE and reclaim it from Spanish control. He wrote to Dey Mohammed Osman Pasha requesting consultation, and the Dey granted him permission. Consequently, the Bey issued a call to jihad and dispatched messengers to the Mascara region. The tribes responded enthusiastically, converging on him from all parts of the Western Province. The inhabitants of Tlemcen, Flitta, and neighboring tribes joined under the command of his son Osman, while the people of Mazouna, Mostaganem, Qal'at Bani Rashid, and the eastern tribes were placed under the command of Mohammed ibn Ibrahim, the Bey's son-in-law. The largest contingent remained directly under the Bey's personal command. (Ibn Hattal, 1969, p. 19)

He also sought to reach an agreement with the scholars of Mascara and its environs to gather students, Qur'an reciters, and teachers, with the aim of establishing a *ribat* at Jabal al-Ma'ida, near the city of Oran, in order to demoralize the Spanish forces and prevent them from accessing external supplies of weapons and provisions. (Ibn Hattal, 1969, pp. 19–20)

The Bey resolved to besiege them and expended from his personal funds whatever was needed in terms of provisions, equipment, and armament. He ordered that teaching activities should only take place on that mountain, after assigning Mohammed ibn Abd Allah to teach the students. (Al-Rashidi, 2013, pp. 240–241). The latter headed to Mascara accompanied by 200 of his students and his two sons, Shaykh

¹ Bey Mohammed el-Kebir, whose full name was Mohammed ibn Osman al-Kurdi, was renowned by the kunya Abu Osman and the epithet Abu al-Futuhāt (Father of Conquests). His mother was a concubine named Za'ida, whom Moulay Ismail, Sultan of the Far Maghreb, gifted to his father as a token of the deep affection that existed between them. As for his brother, Mohammed al-Raqiq (also known as Boukabous), his mother was a free woman named Khadija, whose father hailed from the notables of Médéa. Their father was Abu Ishaq al-Hajj Osman ibn Ibrahim al-Kurdi, who initially served as Khalifa over Miliana before ascending to the position of Bey over Titri and its surrounding regions. The father maintained a close friendship with Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Miliani, who was the commander of Miliana at the time. Upon the death of Bey Osman, Ibrahim assumed responsibility for the family, caring diligently for his two sons, Mohammed el-Kebir and Mohammed al-Raqiq. Recognizing Mohammed el-Kebir's remarkable vitality and courage, Ibrahim arranged his marriage to his own daughter and appointed him as commander over Flitta in 1178 AH/1764 CE. He further designated him as his Khalifa in 1182 AH/1768 CE. Shortly thereafter, Ibrahim integrated him fully into his governance, entrusting him with the administration of the entire eastern sector of the Western Province. (Ibn Hattal, 1969, p. 15-16)

Sidi al-Hani and Sidi Mohammed. The Bey welcomed them with great hospitality, and they proceeded to Yifri. (Gorguos, 1857, p. 46)

Ahmad ibn Sahnun al-Rashidi records that the ribat revived by Bey Mohammed ibn Osman at Wadi Yifri was under his direct supervision. He developed the institution by appointing a director and assistants, overseeing its armament and organization, and sending students to study there. He also provided full financial sponsorship, regularly dispatching aid and supplies of all kinds to the murabitun (those stationed at the outpost) and the sick (Al-Rashidi, 2013, pp. 81–82). Entire families gathered around Yifri after the Bey exempted all residents of Jabal al-Ma'ida from taxation. Furthermore, he prohibited the establishment of any other schools outside this location. (Gorguos, 1857, p. 46)

The author of *Al-Thaghr al-Jumani* mentions the joining of the regular army to the *ribat* and the Bey's review of his battalions: "***The tents, pavilions, canopies, and encampments spread across all those hills and that vast lowland, covering them entirely. The battalions continued to arrive in succession, armies assembled, processions gathered in great numbers, and heroes organized into pairs and individuals.***" (Al-Rashidi, 2013, p. 83). This expansion continued until the number of students reached four hundred. The Bey sent them weapons, food, money, and all necessary supplies. He honored them with financial aid and constructed three water mills for them on the "Mserghin" River. He also provided charitable donations. Given their increasing numbers, he purchased approximately one thousand swords and distributed them among the students. On this, Ibn Sahnun states:

***Committed to providing for them all,
Responding to their calls with attentiveness.*** (Al-Rashidi, 2013, pp. 242–243)

After the students settled on the mountain, intense fighting erupted between them and the Spanish forces, resulting in six students killed and twelve wounded. When their gunpowder and bullets ran out, they resorted to throwing stones. The Spanish exploited this vulnerability to engage them, leading to the death of three more, including the standard-bearer. Upon learning of this, Sayyid Qadi al-Tahir of Mascara confronted the enemy but was wounded, deeply affecting the students. Approximately sixteen Spanish soldiers were injured. As evening fell and the forces dispersed, they carried the wounded Sayyid al-Tahir, who succumbed to his injuries two nights later on the first night of Jumada al-Ula. Ibn Sahnun eulogized him as follows:

***We have lost one whose absence the heart
Cannot endure with patience or resolve
A nobleman attested by all creation,
That he is a lord in every place.
He led through knowledge, piety, and generosity,
And built glory, the most honorable of builders.*** (Al-Rashidi, 2013, pp. 244–245)

The Bey sought to bolster his forces by purchasing weapons and cannons from various regions. He dispatched Ahmad ibn Hattal, along with the qadi of al-Mahalla to the Far Maghreb to acquire arms. He also released all prisoners to enlist their assistance in the conquest of Oran. Meanwhile, Bey Mohammed el-Kebir departed from Mascara to Oran on Thursday, the thirteenth of Safar 1205 AH / 1791 CE, accompanied by five thousand fighters, with the aim of conquering it. (Ibn Hattal, 1969, pp. 20–21)

Abu Ras views Bey Mohammed el-Kebir as one of the heroes of jihad in Islam, likening him to Sayf al-Dawla: "***Sayf al-Dawla was a lover of jihad, prolific in campaigns and conquests; his stances against the infidels were prolonged.***" He notes that the siege of Oran left a profound impact on the Maghrebi imagination, with echoes reaching the province of Tunis during his return from the Hajj:

"When we emerged from the sea in Sha'ban 1205 AH... we found news of the victorious siege by Sidi Mohammed ibn Osman of Oran in Sousse, Monastir, and Sfax... and we found news of the jihad in Oran among the people of Djerba, and also the people of Tunis heard..." (Ibn Abi Ras, n.d., pp. 33, 35)

The author of *Al-Thaghr al-Jumani* highlights the participation of scholars in this military effort, foremost among them Mohammed ibn Abd Allah al-Jalali, Mohammed ibn Ali, and Abu Talib al-Mazuni. The latter joined the ribat despite his advanced age, accompanied by his two sons and two hundred students, combining teaching with jihad. (Saidouni, 1999, p. 441)

2. Negotiations between Algiers and Spain

Negotiations between the Spanish and Algerian governments commenced in June 1785 CE. The aim was to conclude a peace treaty between the two states. They concluded after June 1786 CE without resolving the Oran issue. The peace agreement stipulated in its twentieth article: "The city and base of Mers el-Kebir shall remain as they were previously, without connection to the suburbs, and the Dey of Algiers shall never attack it, nor shall the Bey of Mascara raid it unless he receives orders from the Dey..." (Ibn Abi Ras, n.d., p. 37)

In 1787 CE, Mohammed el-Kebir launched raids on the two bases because the Spanish garrison periodically engaged in plundering, kidnapping, and killing. He assembled soldiers to combat them after gathering weapons, cannons, and craftsmen—including carpenters, turners, and blacksmiths—from every town. He then advanced to Oran. Upon completing his preparations to renew the siege, he called the people to jihad, thereby resuming military operations around the towers in the Oran Valley. This prompted the Spanish government to instruct its consul in Algiers to initiate negotiations with Dey Mohammed ben Osman, offering to relinquish Oran while retaining the Mers el-Kebir base. (Ibn Abi Ras, n.d., p. 38)

Neither the Dey nor the Bey accepted this proposal. (Belbraouat, 2004, p. 267) Upon witnessing the Bey's resolve and strength, the Spanish realized the territory would be wrested from their control. They requested a one-month cessation of hostilities, after which they would surrender the entire territory, including its towers and palaces. Bey Mohammed ben Osman accepted their offer, but they later breached the agreement. Consequently, he confronted them with his troops. On this, Ibn Sahnun states: **"The situation persisted, with new battalions arriving each day until the market of combat dispersed and people returned to their homes and families"**. (Al-Rashidi, 2013, pp. 266, 273, 277, 282)

War resumed anew in May/June 1791 CE, during which Dey Mohammed ben Osman died in the siege. (Ibn Abi Ras, n.d., p. 38) He was succeeded by Hassan Pasha. The Spanish requested a half-month truce from him, offering to reimburse all expenses incurred by the Muslims when Oran was occupied. The Pasha accepted their request and informed the Bey. (Al-Rashidi, 2013, p. 85).

The truce agreement was signed on July 20, 1791 CE, expiring on August 3, 1791 CE. As the deadline approached, a Spanish delegation arrived in Algiers and informed Dey Hassan Pasha that the King of Spain refused to pay war reparations to Bey Mohammed. In late August 1791 CE, the Spanish King wrote to Dey Hassan, confirming his final decision to surrender the entire territory in the condition left by the Muslims in 1732 CE. (Belbraouat, 2004, pp. 267–268). Subsequently, the peace treaty was signed by Dey Hassan Pasha on September 12, 1791 CE, and ratified by the Spanish King on December 12, 1791 CE. The treaty stipulated: the evacuation of the Spanish from the bases of Oran and Mers el-Kebir within a maximum of four months after signing, in addition to their right to establish a trading company in Oran in exchange for paying fees (Ibn Abi Ras, n.d., pp. 38–39). They agreed to surrender

the territory while leaving all Muslim artifacts seized during the era of Bouchlaghem, demolishing what they had built, and paying fifty-five reals for each ship docking in Oran. (Al-Rashidi, 2013, pp. 319–320)

Following the agreement between the parties, the Christian commander ordered his soldiers to inventory every site or tower constructed after or during the Bouchlaghem era, which they did. He then designated new sites for them to demolish, including the Francis Tower, the New Tower, additions behind the Ain Tower, and churches. (Al-Rashidi, 2013, p. 321)

3. The Entry of Bey Mohammed el-Kebir into the City of Oran (1792 CE)

On Monday, 27 February 1792 CE, Bey Mohammed el-Kebir entered the city of Oran. (Boukhroua, 2019, p. 269) On this event, Mohammed ibn Yusuf al-Zayyani writes in his book *Dalil al-Hayran*: “...**He besieged the city of Oran and tightened the noose around it from every direction until he conquered it at dawn on Monday, the fifth of Rajab 1206 AH, without reproach...**” (Al-Zayyani, 2013, p. 261)

Ibn Sahnun al-Rashidi describes the conquest in the following verses:

*The infidels departed bearing the cross,
Driven by the storms of the south.
Grief lay hidden deep within their breasts
From the failure of their purpose and separation from their homeland.
Those polluted lands were cleansed
Of the filth of unbelief and became welcoming.
The bonds of the Trinity were severed,
And the corrupt, wicked creed.* (Al-Rashidi, 2013, p.468)

Bey Mohammed ben Osman, accompanied by his son Osman, proceeded to the capital of Algiers. Pasha Hassan received them with great welcome. He invested the Bey with a golden insignia known in the Ottoman state as the *nishan* and among Algerians as the *risba* (feather) an honor bestowed only upon princes who had conquered a city, and which is placed upon the turban. After the conquest, the Pasha delegated authority to the Bey and granted him absolute permission to manage the city of Oran, saying to him: **“It is your city; you conquered it through your own effort and endeavor, and you restored it to Islam through your jihad. Its affairs are entrusted to your command; no opinion shall prevail over yours.”**

He also appointed his son Osman as heir apparent to his father, and assigned the Bey’s brother the command of the Flitta tribe. The Bey then proceeded to Oran and met with its scholars, where they discussed the fate of those who had collaborated with the Spanish. His opinion was to pardon them and grant them security. (Al-Rashidi, 2013, pp. 86–87).

The Bey moved to the region of Habra* and sent his son to Oran to bring back vessels filled with its water. He instructed him to forward them to the Sultan in Algiers, who in turn sent them—together with the keys of the city—to Caliph Selim ibn Mustafa Khan (Al-Rashidi, 2013, p. 473). The Sharif al-Zahhar records in his memoirs: **“Hassan Pasha dispatched the glad tidings of the conquest of Oran and its keys to Sultan Selim. When the messengers reached Istanbul and met the Grand Vizier, they delivered the letters. The Vizier conveyed the news to the Sultan, who rejoiced greatly, and the Muslims celebrated this mighty conquest and manifest victory.”** (Bouzaouada, 2019, pp. 154–155)

* Located between the cities of Oued Sig and Mohammadia., See: (Al-Rashidi, 2013, p. 473)

Upon his return from Siq, the Bey carried a copy of *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Ibn Sahnun al-Rashidi describes the scene: “...**He carried Sahih al-Bukhari in a magnificent binding placed between two chests filled with books, mounted on a fine mule. He covered the binding with a silk curtain embroidered like the covering of the Kaaba, inscribed with the words of the Declaration of Faith. He assigned a beautiful banner to be carried in front of the mule, and ordered the scholars to walk behind him reciting the Burda and other prophetic panegyrics...**”(Al-Rashidi, 2013, p. 474)

When news reached the Bey that all the Spanish had departed, he ordered the Islamic banners to be raised atop the towers. Accompanied by the scholars, he carried *Sahih al-Bukhari* while voices rose in salutations upon the Prophet, *takbir*, and the call to prayer. Gunshots echoed, and the people rushed to be the first to enter Oran. They marveled at its fortifications. The first to enter after those who had raised the banners were the scholars, followed by the Bey with his troops. He dismounted first at the Red Tower (Rosaxa)*, where he performed two rak‘as of gratitude to God. Afterwards, celebratory cannon fire was unleashed, people came to congratulate him, and Ibn Sahnun recited:

***Rejoice, for the gate of victory now smiles,
Praising you with its fragrant breeze.
The flashes of manifest triumph multiplied
Until they clothed you in rays of light.
You purified this region from the path of perdition
And elevated it above all other lands.
You strove sincerely for the Merciful May
He grants you the best reward in the Hereafter.*** (Al-Rashidi, 2013, pp. 477–479)

The Bey honored Ibn Sahnun and admired his poetry, considering it of exquisite quality. The author of *Al-Thaghr al-Jumani* notes that the Bey’s generosity made Ibn Sahnun wealthy. He also instructed him to write letters to kings announcing the conquest, which occurred on the fourth of Rajab 1206 AH. (Al-Rashidi, 2013, pp. 480, 482) Joy and celebrations spread throughout the land. (Bouzaouada, 2019, p. 154)

Al-Zahhar records in his memoirs that the people entered Oran, repopulated it, and it became the residence of Bey Mohammed. Mosques were built there. (Al-Zahhar, 1980, p. 63). The Bey transferred the seat of the province to Oran and spent the rest of his days restoring and expanding the city, which flourished and became prosperous under his rule. (Muslim, 1974, p. 25) He ordered its reconstruction, and his son supervised the distribution of housing to the inhabitants. (Ibn Abi Ras, n.d., p. 39)

Bey Mohammed el-Kebir continued his reformist and scholarly efforts until his death in 1213 AH / 1798 CE. He passed away in the land of Sabih upon his return from Algiers, (Muslim, 1974, p. 26) after ruling independently as Bey for twenty years and as delegated Khalifa for seven years. (Ibn Hattal, 1969, p. 23)

The author of *Al-Thaghr al-Jumani* draws a comparison between Bey Mohammed ben Osman and other provincial rulers, stating that the Bey surpassed them, for he was the one who achieved the conquest: “**Where would they find, in this region, a city of unbelief to conquer and thus win such glory? Even if they found a city—though none as strongly fortified—where would they find his renowned courage and his resolve fortified by jihad?... Far from it! He preceded them while**

* “Rosacazar,” one of the greatest and most impregnable fortresses of the city, and among its strongest defenses by land and sea. It mounted three hundred cannons and resembled an independent city, with sparks of artillery fire flying from every direction. It is considered one of the monuments of the Muslims, as it was built by Abu al-Hasan al-Marini, according to what the commentator on *al-Halifa ‘Iyya* mentioned (see the same source, pp. 208, 300). (Al-Rashidi, 2013, pp. 208, 300).

they slept; they cannot catch up to him, even over the passage of days..."(Al-Rashidi, 2013, p. 444)

It may be concluded that the second and final liberation of Oran and Mers el-Kebir in 1792 CE had a profoundly positive impact: it removed the Spanish threat from the Algerian West Beylik, restored the territorial integrity of the Regency of Algiers, strengthened its sovereignty internally and externally, and highlighted the effective role played by intellectuals (jurists, men of letters, and students) in managing major state affairs, demonstrating that sovereignty and the future of the nation are the concern of all. (Boukhroua, 2019, p. 269)

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study yields the following key findings:

- The event of the second conquest of Oran generated a rich body of prose and poetic literature composed by scholars and historians to immortalize it. Prominent among them are Ahmad ibn Sahnun al-Rashidi (*Al-Thaghr al-Jumani fi Ibtisam al-Thaghr al-Wabrani*), Ahmad ibn Hattal (*The Journey of Mohammed el-Kebir, Bey of the Algerian West, to the Algerian Desert South*), and Abu Ras al-Nasir (*Aja'ib al-Asfar wa Lata'if al-Akhhbar*). These writings blend literary and historical dimensions and remain valuable sources for future historical research, as they shed light on multiple aspects of the event.
- Bey Mohammed el-Kebir played a leading role in the liberation of Oran after the return of Spanish occupation in 1144 AH / 1732 CE. He provided arms and equipment, revived the ribat system, equipped it comprehensively, and supported the murabitun—students, scholars, and teachers such as Mohammed ibn Abd Allah al-Jalali and Mohammed ibn Ali—who participated in the second conquest of 1792 CE.
- The scholarly class (jurists, scholars, and students) made an effective contribution to the final liberation of Oran and to the restoration of Algerian territorial unity, reflecting their deep engagement with the existential issues facing the nation.
- Bey Mohammed el-Kebir's efforts did not end with the conquest of Oran; his reformist and scholarly initiatives in the West Beylik continued until his death in 1798 CE.

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