

Commander of the Faithful: The Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader: A Story of True Jihad

Commander of the Faithful: The Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader: A Story of True Jihad Monkfish Book Publishing, 2008 by John Kiser—ISBN:978-09798828-3-8—Hardcover-360 pages.

Since September 11, 2001, Muslims have been stereotyped and the message and image of Islam have been tarnished. Self-proclaimed leaders have given new and twisted meanings to the message of Islam. Explanations of complex issues have been reduced to sound bites on television. No issue has been in this regard more profaned than jihad, a sacred term for Muslims. There is no dearth of explanations regarding jihad, and in this poisonous environment John Kiser's *Commander of the Faithful: The Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader: A Story of True Jihad* was published. Once I started reading it, I could not put it down. This book is a must read for all who want to understand the true meaning and application of jihad.

The book starts with the following introduction written by students from the small town of Elkader, Iowa, which was named after Abd el-Kader:

Elkader in Iowa: Such is the history of the man for whom our town is named. A scholar, a philosopher, a lover of liberty; a champion of his religion, a born leader of men, a great soldier, a capable administrator, a persuasive orator, a chivalrous opponent; the selection was well made, and with those pioneers of seventy years ago, we do honor The Sheik. Class of 1915, Elkader High School.

The author John Kiser invited the current students at Elkader's Central Community High School to participate in an annual essay contest in 2009 focusing on the timeless relevance of Abd el-Kader, a 19th century hero. Student Stephannie Fox-Dixon wrote the winning essay entitled "A Servant of God," and Rebecca Roberts was the runner-up with her essay entitled "Commander of the Faithful."

In 1808, a child of destiny was born in the Ottoman province of Oran, today western Algeria. His tribe, the Hachem, was dedicated to the study of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and settling disputes. In the decades that followed, his name would be given to a settlement in Iowa, to a ship built in Massachusetts and to a champion race horse in Ireland. William Thackery would dedicate poetry to him, and his name would be placed on the presidential ballot by citizens of Bordeaux while he was still a prisoner of the French government. President Lincoln and *The New York Times* would honor him. The story of Abd el-Kader's rise to world fame offers lessons for today.

During the mid-19th century, Abd el-Kader was admired from the Great Plains to Moscow to Mecca—first as a chivalrous adversary of the French after they invaded North Africa in 1830 and later as a stoic prisoner who forced France to honor its pledge of safe passage to the Middle East after his surrender in 1847. As an exile in Damascus, he protected thousands of Christians during a Turkish-inspired pogrom. President Lincoln, Pope Pius IX, French generals and former prisoners sang his praises. Upon his death in 1883, *The New York Times* eulogized, "...The nobility of his character won him the admiration of the world... He was one of the few great men of the century."

For Muslims, Abd el-Kader reminds them that true jihad, or "holy exertion," lies not in the zeal of bitterness to fight whatever the cost, but in living righteously in accordance with Divine Law. During a life of struggle with foreign occupation, despair in prison, and exile in a foreign land, he never allowed the demons of hatred and revenge to trump compassion and forgiveness. His story is timely. It is one of struggle, restraint and self-control harnessed to Divine Law, as one might expect from a man whose name means "servant of God," el-Kader being one of the beautiful names of God.

Abd el-Kader waged war according to Qur'anic

rules of conduct. These prohibit the destruction of nature, shooting in the face, mutilation of dead bodies, killing of women and children, priests and monks, rape, and the mistreatment of prisoners. The emir (commander) ended the centuries-old desert warfare custom of decapitating prisoners taken on the battlefield. Prisoners were an unwanted burden and the distribution of plunder was determined by the number of enemy heads taken. To counter the protests from his soldiers, the emir offered bounty payments for prisoners brought in unharmed, but for those guilty of mistreating prisoners, his “reward” was 25 strokes with a cane on the soles of their feet.

On August 19, 1841, at the prestigious Kairouan center of Islamic learning in Tunis the subject of jihad was discussed at length in light of the Qur’an’s teachings and those of its greatest commentators. A contentious debate finally produced a fatwa (considered opinion). It declared:

When Muslims whose territory has been invaded by infidels have fought so long as there was hope of driving them out of the country, and when it is certain that continued struggle will only lead to the ruin of Muslims without any chance of defeating the conquerors, and while preserving the hope of their yoke being removed with the help of God, they may live under the domination of infidels on the condition that they are allowed to freely exercise their religion, and their women and daughters will be respected, [p. 159]

Exhausted after fifteen years of sacrifice and suffering in the face of superior French military power, Abd el-Kader persuaded his die-hard lieutenants to lay down their arms in what had become a futile armed resistance:

Believe me, the fight is over. We must lay down our guns. God is our witness that we have fought as long and as hard as we could – so long as there was hope of liberating our country. But most of the tribes have quit the struggle. My own brothers have submitted to Lamoricier. Now Muslims are killing Muslims. The sultan has imprisoned our

brother in arms, Bou Hamidi, massacred the Beni Armer and sold their wives into slavery. The French kept their word after Ben Salem submitted. I would rather put my trust in those whom we have fought against than those who have betrayed us. If I thought there were still a possibility to defeat France, I would continue. Further resistance will only create vain suffering. We must accept the judgment of God who has not given us victory and who in his infinite wisdom now wants this land to belong to Christians. Are we going to oppose His will? [p. 189]

The Qur’an forbids vain and useless suffering and no one could accuse the emir of not giving his all for the cause of God.

His offer of a truce surprised French generals and enabled the emir to extract from them a promise of free passage to the Middle East to live in permanent exile. A month later the French monarchy fell and a new republican government renounced the agreement. The emir insisted the new government honor the word of its generals. The War Ministry tried bribing the emir to remain in France as an honorary citizen where he and his extended family could enjoy the blessings of its “higher” civilization. Un-tempted by offers of riches, he was willing to die in French prisons if that was necessary to shame France into honoring its agreement. Abd el-Kader’s piety, intellectual curiosity, stoicism and willingness to address himself to the higher instincts of the French won him admirers among generals, former prisoners, clerics, poets, politicians, and even English nobility. In October 1852, a sympathetic President Louis-Napoleon liberated the emir, who had lost twenty-five members of his extended family to pneumonia, tuberculosis and depression.

Yet, Abd el-Kader, a man of puritanical simplicity and abstinence was also a rebel who upset old ways. He took a firm stand against prevailing customs which in his mind violated Qur’anic principles. He forced tribes to pay war taxes in times of peace. He forbade the age-old practice of decapitating prisoners on the battlefield. He insisted on humane treatment of French prisoners taken into captivity. The emir rescued innocent Christians from angry and intolerant Muslims, which caused some less-enlightened Muslims to despise him as a French lack-

ey and an infidel. He accepted willingly to receive French chaplains who might be sent to attend to the needs of the French prisoners.

Abd el-Kader's humanitarianism, and specifically his rules for the treatment of prisoners, anticipated the Geneva Code of 1949 which codified human rights and prisoners' rights. The emir's humanitarian accomplishments were the subject of an international conference at The Palace of Nations in Geneva sponsored by the United Nations in April 2006: Emir Abdelkader, forerunner of human rights and champion of interreligious dialogue.

When a Druze mob in Damascus demanded he turn over the Christians under his protection, the 52-year-old warrior threatened to teach them a lesson in Islamic morality and in making elementary distinctions. He reminded them of the Qur'anic verse that condemns the killing of innocents. The Christians he had once killed had invaded his country. Those in Damascus were not his enemies.

Warfare, betrayal, imprisonment, and the shame of having made his family victims of false promises might have given the emir good reason to have been bitter toward his enemies and to have held a grudge against all Christians. Yet he nursed neither hatred nor a desire for revenge. Instead, he learned much from his bitter experience in prison and valued the sympathetic admirers in France who tried to make his life easier. His lifelong jihad to keep destructive passions under control was a jihad Muslims and non-Muslims alike could benefit from emulating.

Today, more than ever, Muslims and non-Muslims alike need to be reminded of the courage, compassion and intellect of Emir Abd el-Kader. The author beautifully narrates the dramatic story of how the moral compass provided by Abd el-Kader's faith and learning propelled him to become one of 19th century's most admired figures. His conduct in war, prison and exile present the true concept of jihad. Abd el Kader's jihad provides Muslims with a much needed antidote to the toxic false jihads of today, which are dominated by anger, violence and

politics. The story of this Muslim hero's tolerance, humanity and forbearance offer a powerful and persuasive rebuttal to the notion that Islamic values are threatening to the Western way of life.

The editor of the Pakistani monthly, Al-Sharia, Muhammed Nasir, summarized the emir's importance to the Muslim world:

First, he never was overwhelmed by blind zeal to fight at all costs and was capable of making wise judgments. Secondly, he is strictly guided in his decisions by the legal limitations and moral obligations of Divine Law—he knows when it is permissible to kill Christians and when to risk his own life to save them. Thirdly, despite his political animosity toward France, he is not blind to what is common between their religion and his own...and finally, he can put himself in his adversaries' shoes and look into the complexities of the situation and understand the factors that make them follow a certain course. Abd el-Kader is not only a symbol of resistance and struggle against foreign domination, but the embodiment of true theological, moral and rational ideas taught by Islam.

In other words, the emir possessed four qualities that contributed to his greatness: self-control, duty to higher law, recognition of commonality amidst difference, and an unusual ability to empathize, even with his adversaries. These qualities are in short supply throughout today's world.

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