



Ethical Leadership Case Study

'In the Shadow of the Sword'

Emir Abdelkader: Rumors in Damascus, 1860

Pedagogical Objectives

Emir Abdelkader's decisions, and the impact of those decisions, provide the framework for dialogue in the classroom and among civic and religious groups. Our intention is to introduce an important Muslim historical figure whose legacy of moral courage serves as a global icon of religious and ethical leadership. These cases do not attempt to provide answers or conclusions, but rather are opportunities for students and citizens to consider decision-making under conditions of duress and uncertainty.



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Emir Abd el-Kader 1865,
photograph by French
Journalist Étienne Carjat

Rumors in Damascus (A)

An ancient crossroad, Damascus was the capital of Greater Syria, a province of the decaying Ottoman Empire that included today's Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan and parts of Iraq, Turkey and Iran. The Empire was known in diplomatic circles as the "Sick Man of Europe," and was rife with discontented minorities. Some believed that the "Sick Man's" demise was imminent, including many members of the Christian community, in Damascus.

The rumors circulating in this ancient city in March 1860 were ugly. There were few details, but Emir Abdelkader heard threats of impending violence toward the Christian community. The local Christians were going to be collectively punished by the Ottoman authorities for refusing to pay taxes.

Four years earlier, European colonial powers imposed the elimination of the *dhimmi* system on the Ottoman Sultan, which Ottoman authorities resented. This system restricted access of non-Muslim minorities to certain government positions, including serving in the Ottoman-Turkish army. For being relieved of this obligation, non-Muslims had to pay an annual ten-shilling head tax, but many ignored the edict and local Ottoman authorities continued to demand payment from Christians.

Local authorities, like Governor Ahmed Pasha, viewed the refusal to pay the head tax as evidence that Christians represented a fifth column whose loyalties were suspect. Pasha resolved to "correct" their insolence. He called a meeting of Druze leaders and local notables, including the *mufti* of Damascus. Abdelkader's informants reported that the agenda for the meeting was to counter the European-imposed reforms with intimidation. Concerned, Abdelkader called on the French consul about reports that came directly from Algerians who had loyally followed him into exile. The plotters approached some of Abdelkader's loyalists to join in the scheme, and the Emir told his people to play along. Two meetings took place and Pasha reassured the diplomats that there would be no violence.

Abdelkader was not persuaded and 20,000 Christians were at risk of being harmed. After learning that villages outside of Damascus had been pillaged, the Emir wrote a letter directly to the Druze leaders implicated in the plot, urging caution and counseling "... *the wise calculate the consequences of their actions before taking the first step.*"¹ The Emir also sent letters to the local *ulema* (Muslim legal scholars) and Damascus notables, reminding them of their obligation under Islamic law to protect minorities, especially People of the Book.

¹ As Emir Abdelkader told his biographer Charles Henry Churchill in Emir Abd-el Kader, ex sultan of Algeria, (Chapman & Hall, 1867)

At the end of May, the Emir again went to the French Consul this time with precise details of the violent plot soon to break out and as only in cases of emergency, the Consul used special embassy funds for the Emir to purchase weapons. Abdelkader's quiet life of teaching, scholarship, and reflection would soon come to an end.

The Making of a Scholar and a Warrior

In 1807, a grey-eyed baby was born in a goatskin tent in Oran, nominally part of the Ottoman Regency of Algiers. Greeted by cries, chants, and incantations, he would be named Abdelkader, "servant of the Almighty."

From his mother, Lalla Zohra, Abdelkader learned to read Qur'an, to write, and to make his own clothes. She taught him the daily ablutions that precede prayer five times a day, but instructed that ritual purity is half of faith—both symbol and reminder of the harder half—to purify one's inner self. To be a good Muslim, she explained, he had to be free of egotistical desires and unruly passions. In a hierarchical world, she taught, submission needed to be practiced—first to God, then to one another, according to rank.

At the age of eight, Lalla Zohra turned her son's education over to his scholarly father, Muhi al-Din. The young boy's days were divided between religious instruction and horsemanship. From the hunt, he learned to shoot accurately at full gallop, find water, load a mule, identify the tents and birds of prey used by hostile as well as friendly tribes, and to eat and drink little.

At age eighteen, his father took him on a two-year pilgrimage, traveling through Tunis, Alexandria, Cairo, Sinai, Mecca, Damascus, and Baghdad. He met Jews in Cairo different from those at home and was surprised to encounter Arab Christians. In Sinai, they talked for hours with monks about the unity of God and the diversity of religious paths. He learned about the Druze in Damascus who shared a belief in Prophet Muhammad but diverged in some practices.



Emir Abd el-Kader
Horace Vernet,
Zoummeroff
Collection



Arab Cavalry in Battle, Eugène Delacroix
1832, Musée Fabre, Montpellier.

The French invaded Algiers in 1830, when Abdelkader was twenty-two. His family, like others unhappy with Ottoman-Turkish rule, initially viewed the French occupiers as liberators. The invasion force consisted of 300 ships and 30,000 soldiers and quickly alienated the local population with their conduct. The troops desecrated mosques and raped women, violating the promises made by General Bourmont as part of a capitulation agreement. Two years after the French arrived, tribes in the province of Oran elected Abdelkader's father, Muhi al-Din, to lead the struggle. His first act of leadership was to abdicate in favor of his son.

Abdelkader acquired a mission: not only to fight the French, but to renew an Islamic culture he believed had been degraded by years of greed and misrule by the provincial *beys* of the Ottoman Empire. Over the next 15 years, Abdelkader consulted the Sunnah (practices of the Prophet) and Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet) on matters such as the treatment of prisoners. He found affirmation of his instincts in the actions of the Prophet who scolded his son-in law, Ali, for decapitating prisoners after they surrendered. To counter a tradition in which a literal “head count” was used to allocate booty taken on the battlefield, the Emir offered his fighters both carrot and stick: a monetary reward of eight *douros* for each French prisoner brought back to camp; and for soldiers guilty of mistreating prisoners, a punishment of 25 strokes on the bottom of their feet with a cane.

By 1846, Abdelkader was worn down by French tactics of continuous pursuit and punishment of all tribes who supported him. After one last 2,100-mile attempt to rally wavering tribes, despair hung over his camp in Morocco. The chiefs could not be convinced to support him. “You are like a fly that torments a bull,” they told him. “After you anger it and disappear, we are the ones who get gored.”²

Faced with a decision to fight or flee to avoid entrapment, several of his battle-hardened lieutenants urged flight into the desert in order to continue harassing the enemy. The Emir disagreed. He believed that further resistance to French forces would only cause futile suffering. They might escape, but the wounded and their own families would be taken prisoner. The Arab population would be afflicted as well. It was time to end the struggle. He knew the Qur’an condemns vain and useless suffering, and the facts on the ground no longer supported his belief that he was serving God’s will.

On December 21, 1847, Abdelkader offered an unexpected truce proposal to General Lamoricière, which was accepted by King Louis Philippe’s son, the governor of Algeria. In exchange for ceasing hostilities, Abdelkader demanded that France send him into exile, to another Muslim country. In return, Abdelkader promised never to return to Algeria. Known as a man whose word was sacred, the Emir’s promise was believed. The die-hards in his council submitted to the Emir’s judgment and their 17-year struggle against the French ended.

In France

The offer of a truce from Abdelkader was a surprise. The French Parliament was not prepared for the news or for the negotiated terms. Generals saw vindication of their relentless pursuit strategy following years of being mocked in the French press for their ineptitude in capturing the Emir. But when the French monarchy fell shortly thereafter, a new republican government renounced the agreement.

The War Ministry tried seducing the Emir into remaining in France as an honorary citizen where he and his extended family would enjoy horses, harems, baths, chateaus, and cultivated

² Ibid

fields—a virtual mini-state. Not tempted by these offers, Abdelkader insisted France keep its word. If necessary, he was willing to die in prison.

Throughout his tribulations, Abdelkader's intellectual curiosity, stoicism, and willingness to address the French with respect won a circle of admirers. A lobby developed around him—*Kaderians*—of Catholic clerics, bankers, diplomats, military officers, poets, political figures, society women, and former French prisoners whom the Emir had treated with unexpected humanity. In October 1852, a sympathetic President Louis-Napoleon liberated the Emir from imprisonment at Chateau Amboise where during four years, 25 members of his extended family of loyalists had died from pneumonia, tuberculosis, and depression.

In Exile

Under the sponsorship of the French government, Abdelkader and his family moved to Damascus, together with loyal Algerian war veterans. He settled into a life of study, reflection, and teaching in the great Umayyad Mosque. His home was now a 2-story, 32-room Tudor mansion on the Nakib Allée with tiled interior courtyards, an alabaster fountain, and a rich history, as it was once the residence of the 12th century philosopher of universal love, Ibn Arabi.

However, on July 9, 1860, the relative peace of Abdelkader's home in exile was shattered. The rumored plans to attack Christians proved true. Abdelkader's appeal for arms to the French embassy succeeded. He and his Algerian fighters were equipped to face the onslaught. He first ordered the rescue of French, Dutch, American, and Russian diplomats; and then with the help of his sons, he led thousands to the safety of his mansion, transferring them under guard, one hundred at a time, to the citadel of Damascus. After hoisting the French flag on the roof of his villa, he and a handful of Algerians had rushed into the cobblestone streets of the Christian quarter to rescue the Franciscans and Lazarists, as well as other Christians who were being pillaged, raped, forcibly circumcised and slaughtered in their homes.

Two days after the riots began, Abdelkader's home was besieged by an enraged mob of Arabs, Kurds, and Druze shouting for the Emir to hand over the Christians.

"Give us the Christians"

"Keep the diplomats but give us the Christians!"

"They attacked your country... why are you protecting them?"

"Hand over those you are protecting or you will be punished the same as those you are protecting!"

"You killed Christians yourself. How can you oppose us for avenging their insults?"

"You are like the infidels yourself—hand over those you are protecting or you will suffer the same fate as those you are hiding."³

³ Ibid

Rumors in Damascus (B)

On the morning of July 11, 1860, a mob was now banging on the door of Abdelkader's residence in Damascus. Confronting the crowd, Emir Abdelkader barely paused before he spoke:

My brothers, your behavior violates the law of God. What makes you think you can go around killing innocent people? Have you sunk so low that you are slaughtering innocent women and children? Didn't God say in our holy book, whoever kills a man who has never committed murder or created disorder in the land will be regarded as a killer of all humanity?

You are fools and idiots. The Christians I killed were invaders and occupiers ravaging our country... If you will not listen to me then God did not provide you with reason—you are like animals aroused only by the sight of grass and water.

*As long as my soldiers are still standing you will not touch them. They are my guests. Murderers of women and children, you sons of sin, try to take on of these Christians and you will learn how well my soldiers fight.*⁴

Abdelkader was credited with saving five to ten thousand lives. His first biographer, Charles Henry Churchill later wrote, "Abdelkader alone stood between the living and the dead ... To say the Turks took no measures to stay the deluge of massacre and fire would be superfluous. They the connived in it, they instigated it; they shared in it."⁵

Abdelkader's most valued accolade was a letter from Emir Shamil, a Chechen freedom fighter imprisoned in Moscow, who praised him for his courage to do what his faith required: *You have put into practice the words of the Prophet and set yourself apart from those who reject his example... I was stupefied by the blindness of the functionaries who committed these excesses.*⁶

To a congratulatory letter from French Bishop Pavy of Algiers, the Emir responded:

*That which we did for the Christians we did to be faithful to Islamic law and out of respect for human rights... All the religions of the book rest on two principals — to praise God and to be compassionate toward his creatures. Those who belong to the religion of Mohammad have corrupted it, which is why they are like lost sheep. Thank you for your prayers and good will toward me.*⁷

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 303.

⁷ Kiser, John W. *Commander of the Faithful, the Life and Times of Emir Abdelkader*. (Monkfish Book Publishing Co., 2008), p. 302.

Discussion Guide

Words and Concepts	
Qur'an - central (revealed) religious text of Islam	
Sunnah – the acts and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed	
Hadith – saying of the Prophet	
Dhimmi – historical term for a non-Muslim ‘protected’ citizen of a Muslim state	
Emir – commander, general, or prince	
Kurds – ethnic group belonging to Kurdistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria	
Exile – forced resettlement or deportation from one’s homeland	
Druze – “the People of Monotheism;” a branch of Shi’a Islam	
Colonialism - the policy or practice of full or partial political control over another country, occupying it and exploiting it economically	
Ottoman Empire – in power from 1299 until after WWI	

Select Themes

Moral/Religious Courage and Risky Decision-Making

After Abdelkader’s 17-year battle with French imperial powers in Algeria, why does he decide to save Christians in Damascus? What were the life-threatening risks he took and why?

Religious and National Identities

This case raises issues about religious and national identities. Students may consider ‘what are the boundaries of *my* religion *and my* nation?’

Jihad

The narrative arc of Abdelkader’s story offers the opportunity to engage in a conversation about *Jihad*, a word used and misused in common parlance, in the media, and in propagandistic materials. To tease out its meaning in this case, Abdelkader’s Jihad includes the struggle:

- For knowledge and truth
- Against French colonialists

- With local tribes and Arabs who rejected his leadership
- Against anger, hatred and despair in French prisons
- To live in submission to God's will
- For self-mastery
- For justice.

What is "holy war"?

Among some young Algerians today, Abdelkader's reputation is tarnished. They asked, "What are you telling us ... to give up?" He didn't fight to the death.

Discuss tension between obedience and agency in this story.

Relevance for today

- Are there lessons in Abdelkader's story for Muslims and non-Muslims alike?
- Are there lessons for the U.S. in Iraq, Afghanistan?
- What are the resonances of this story for today's interfaith relations?
- The French Revolution and European Colonialism are two dominant themes of the 19th century. In what ways are they still alive today?
- How might we understand the colonial legacies in Damascus 2018, as the civil war persists in Syria?

Abdelkader's Legacy

While Abdelkader fought the French:

- An American lawyer, Timothy Davis, established Elkader, Iowa USA in 1846
- Citizens of Bordeaux, placed his name on the French presidential ballot while he was still prisoner of the French government
- A racehorse named "Little Ab" wins British National Steeple Chase in 1851
- Abdelkader co-authors with Gen. Eugene Daumas, Horses of the Sahara
- British poet William Thackeray dedicated his poem *The Caged Hawk* to Abdelkader.
- British military attaché, Charles Henry Churchill, seeks out Abdelkader to write his biography.

After Abdelkader's intervention in Damascus:

- Legion of Honor award by France
- Gift by President Lincoln of rare Colt pistols

- Medals of recognition from Pope Pius IX and European heads of state
- Invitation to French Masonic Lodge Henry IV, joining Franklin, Lafayette, Laplace, Monge, Talleyrand
- Invitation to opening of Suez Canal in 1869, after Abdelkader assisted in getting Arab support for the project, a symbol of East-West cooperation
- *As they confer, they understand each other swiftly; each respects the other. If opportunity allowed, they would prefer each other's society and desert their former companions. Enemies would become affectionate. Hector and Achilles, Richard and Saladin, Wellington and Soult, General Daumas and Abdel-Kader, become aware that they are nearer and more alike than any other two, and if their nation and circumstance did not keep them apart, they would run into each other's arms."* Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Society and Solitude, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1870. p. 271.
- A ship -- *The Abdelkader* -- launched in Newburyport MA.
- February 1883, The New York Times posted an eight-hundred word obituary of the Emir concluding, "He was one of the few great men of the century."
- Another town called Elkader, Kansas, USA. Estab. 1887 (no longer inhabited).

20th and 21st Century:

- Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Shaykh Abdel-Halim Mahmoud (d. 1978) sought to integrate science and faith as a method for living Islam in contemporary society and gives the example of Abdelkader.
- Elkader, Iowa and Mascara, Algeria become Sister Cities in 1985. President Boutafilka, in 2008, sent \$150,000 in unsolicited aid to citizens of Elkader recovering from 2008 flood.
- April 2006, U.N. sponsored conference in Place of Nations, entitled *Abdelkader, forerunner of human rights and champion of interreligious dialogue*. Peter Maurer, president of the Int'l Committee of the Red Cross commented: " Abdelkader is the undisputed leader in the codification of modern international humanitarian law."
- Editor of Pakistani monthly, *Al-Sharia*, Muhammad Khan Nasir, summarizes his view of Abdelkader's importance (2007): "... he never was overwhelmed by blind zeal to fight at all costs and was capable of making wise judgments. ... he is 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. ... despite political animosity toward France, he is not blind to what is common between their religion and his own. ... he put himself in his adversaries' shoes and looked into the complexities of the situation ... not only a symbol of resistance and struggle against foreign domination, but the embodiment of true theological, moral and rational ideas taught by Islam."

- Elsa Marston writes The Compassionate Warrior, Wisdom Press, 2012, for young adults.
- Ahmed Bouyerdene’s book Abdelkader, Hero and Saint of Islam, 2012, Wisdom Press translated into English from French.
- 2013 University of Virginia’s Center for Advanced Studies in Culture selects its first Abdelkader Memorial Leadership Scholarship recipient, Jeffrey Guhin, whose research is a comparison of catholic school and *madrassa* pedagogies.
- Imam Mohammed Lazzouni (born in Oran 1970), board chair of Center for Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations, Merrimack College, a Catholic college in the Augustinian tradition. Thagaste (now Souk Ahras, Algeria) is the birthplace of St. Augustine. Lazzouni: *“The climax of the Abdelkader story is the start of something new ... just as everyone now accepts Augustinian teachings as universal. It takes a narrative*



to appropriate a perspective, and Abdelkader offers that possibility.”

- Marine Corps Scholarship Foundation established an endowed Abdelkader Leadership scholarship, in 2013, for college age children of Marines killed or incapacitated. And, Marine Corps University utilizes teachings from Abdelkader’s campaigns and conduct.
- 2013 Pakistani religious scholar, Mohammed Khan Nasir (editor *al-Sharia*), is under attack by Taliban militants for holding up Abdelkader as model Muslim.



- Abdelkader Education Project (AEP) www.abdelkaderproject.org is based in Elkader, Iowa, directed by Kathy Garms. AEP hosts national essay and poster contests for high school and college students.



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