

When did Abd el-Kader die?

A lesson on the limitations of primary sources



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Introduction

As the Education Coordinator for the Abdelkader Education Project, one of my responsibilities is creating, editing, and disseminating curriculum related to Abd el-Kader. As such, I try to educate myself about the Emir and make sure that the details we present in our curricula are accurate. The three biographies of Abd el-Kader I've read (Bouyerdene, Kiser, Marston) claim he died at his home in Damascus in 1883. Kiser quotes a eulogy published by the *New York Times*:

Great men are not so abundant that we can afford to lose them without a word. If to be an ardent patriot, a soldier whole genius is unquestioned, and whose honor is stainless; a statesman who could weld the wild tribes of Africa into a formidable army, and a hero who could accept defeat and disaster without a murmur--if to be all these constitutes a great man, Abdl-el-Kader deserves to be ranked among the foremost of the few great men of the century.

"Deserves to be ranked among the foremost of the few great men of the century"? I was impressed by the majesty of the claim and wanted to read it in the context of the article. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that the article was published on February 25, 1873, a full decade before his death!

Beginning with the question "When did Abd el-Kader die?" I contacted Kiser, who contacted Bouyerdene (Marston died in 2017), and I spent untold hours combing the *New York Times* archives and reading articles on Newspapers.com. In the end, I was able to construct a story that satisfied me, but many questions remain.

The purpose of this lesson is to give your students the same experience of discovery that I enjoyed as I attempted to use primary sources to answer my own essential (compelling) question: When did Abd el-Kader die?

Lesson Objectives

Use multiple primary sources to determine an answer to a seemingly obvious and uninteresting question. In doing so, uncover a mystery and recognize the limitations of primary source documents.

Iowa Social Studies Standards

- **Inquiry**
 - SS.9-12.2: Develop supporting questions that contribute to an inquiry and demonstrate how, through engaging source work, new compelling and supporting questions emerge.
 - SS.9-12.8: Construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples, and details with significant and pertinent information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanations.
- **Literacy**
 - WHST.9-10.7, WHST.11-12.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Lesson Materials

- [Articles \(adapted for HS lesson\)](#)
- [Document analysis: four-column worksheet](#)
- [Critical thinking questions](#)
- [Slides: biography of Abd el-Kader \(optional\)](#)
- [Script: biography of Abd el-Kader \(optional\)](#)

Lesson Plan

Notes

- This lesson assumes a small amount of background on Abd el-Kader. If students haven't learned about him, provide context by showing this [slideshow](#), using this [script](#).
- I have provided seven articles. If desired, reduce student reading load by omitting Articles A and F.
- In adapting the articles, I standardized the spelling of Abd el-Kader's father's name. Articles of the time refer to Abd el-Kader's father as Sidi-el-Hajj Mehaddin or Sidi el Madiden, while contemporary biographers use Muhi ad-Din or Muhi al-Din. These are simply different spellings of the father's Arabic name. *Sidi el Hadj* (or *Hajj*) is a title given to dignitaries and highly respected people. *Sidi* means "my lord"; *Hadj* is a title for people who have performed pilgrimage to Mecca.

1. Provide copies of articles and four-column worksheet.
2. Use whatever method you prefer to have students read and analyze the articles (individual reading, partner reading, etc.).
3. Hand out--and ask students to complete--critical thinking questions.
4. Follow with discussion.
5. Optional: Ask students to examine Article A for bias. Lead them to see that the article is written from the point of view of one who accepts without question French colonization of Northern Africa. How does this journalist make Abd el-Kader appear hungry for war and power?

Suggested reading/viewing

Bouyerdene, Ahmed. *Emir Abd El-Kader: Hero and Saint of Islam*. World Wisdom, 2013.

Churchill, Charles Henry. *The Life of Abdel Kader: Ex-Sultan of the Arabs of Algeria*. Chapnab and Hall, 1867.

Kiser, John W. *Commander of the Faithful: the Life and Times of Emir Abd El Kader*. Monkfish Book Pub., 2008.

Kiser, John W. "When Americans Honored an Icon of Jihad – Emir-Stein Center."
EmirStein Center,
www.emir-stein.org/ai_videos/when-americans-honored-an-icon-of-jihad/.

Marston, Elsa. *Compassionate Warrior - Abd El-Kader of Algeria*. World Wisdom Books, 2013. (Suitable for grades 6-10 and adults looking for a shorter biography than the others mentioned here.)