

Historical Background on Abd El-Kader

Abd el-Kader was born in September 1808 near the city of Mascara, Algeria. His father, Muhi al- Din al-Hasani, was a *marabout*, a respected religious leader. At eight years old, Abd el-Kader's father began tutoring him in the Islamic religious tradition. He was a brilliant student and by the age of 13, Abd el-Kader had become a qualified teacher and commentator on the *Quran* and *hadith* (the actions and sayings of the prophet Muhammad). Abd el-Kader's learning, though, did not come from books alone, a great deal of his curriculum was devoted to hunting, survival in the desert, and horsemanship.

At the age of 14, Abd el-Kader's father sent him to the provincial capital, Oran, to continue his religious education. It was there that he saw first-hand the temptations of city life and the laxity of Islamic religious practice of many of the citizens of Oran. These things, along with what he saw as the arrogance of the Turkish rulers, bothered the young student.



In 1826, he and his father went on pilgrimage to Mecca. On the way, the party visited political and religious notables and holy shrines in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. This gave Abd el-Kader the opportunity to discuss religious and political ideas with people from different Islamic sects, nations, and beliefs.

While Abd el-Kader and his father were on pilgrimage, the French occupied Algeria in the hope of exploiting the ports on Algeria's coast and the fertile interior, to replace colonial territories it had lost in America. The tribes from around the plain of Ghriss asked Muhi al-Din to lead the struggle against the French. The old *sheikh* instead put forward the 25-year old Abd el-Kader, who was enthusiastically accepted as *emir ala mu'minin*, or commander of the faithful.

By 1834, both Abd el-Kader and the French general in Oran, Louis Alexis Desmichels, needed a truce, but neither could afford to be seen as the weaker party. Desmichel's troops were being decimated more by disease than fighting; Abd el-Kader needed peace and legitimacy to build his state. In the end, Desmichels wrote the emir and, through Algerian Jewish intermediaries, the two leaders agreed on a treaty. However, the final text of the treaty did not fully reflect the original agreements. In the event, both sides claimed victory, and Abd el-Kader used the time of truce to train his army and rein in rebellious tribes.

The French, however, did not keep their promise and what ensued instead were several years of battles, ambushes and guerrilla tactics between the two parties. By 1841, France finally decided that only total war, full colonization and a merciless 'scorched earth' policy versus the indigenous people would pacify Algeria. They sent

the hard-liner General Bugeaud to Algiers to begin a ruthless and successful campaign to take Abd el-Kader's interior strongholds.

Eventually, Abd el-Kader negotiated an armistice and voluntarily laid down arms to avoid useless suffering. In return, he negotiated free passage to Damascus for his extended family and followers who wanted to join him in exile, with a promise to never return to Algeria and cause trouble. Public opinion in France, however, feared that the emir would be a danger if allowed to live in exile in the Middle East. At what they thought was a re-provisioning stop at Touloun, the emir and his retinue were imprisoned at Fort Lamalque and later the chateau of Henry of Navarre in Pau, France. Abd el-Kader had been betrayed.

While imprisoned in Pau, Abd el-Kader became a celebrity. People streamed from all over France and beyond to visit him and left impressed with his determined endurance, his erudition, and his spirited, often playful, conversations. Finally, Napoleon III agreed to liberate him on the condition that he never return to Algeria. Abd el-Kader and his family moved first to Bursa, in Ottoman Turkey, and eventually to Damascus.

This, however, would not be the end of Abd el-Kader's noble deeds. In July 1860, simmering tensions over political reforms exploded and anti-Christian riots broke out in the city. Abd el-Kader, a strong believer in religious tolerance and brotherhood, gave shelter to over a thousand Christians and diplomats in his mansion. He also made several forays into the Christian quarter to lead Christians to safety, and stood fast against the mob. In recognition of Abd el-Kader's courageous actions, the French bestowed on him the Légion d'honneur, one of the nation's highest honors.

Abd el-Kadir died on May 26, 1883 in Damascus, revered by all for his courage, dignity and intellect. His remains were repatriated to Algeria in 1966.