

Document Based Analysis: Perspectives on Abd el-Kader

Introduction:

Algeria's Abd el-Kader is considered to be the "father of the nation" by Algeria, as he fought against a stronger military colonial power (France) in his attempt to achieve independence. Eventually, Abd el-Kader negotiated an armistice and voluntarily laid down arms to avoid useless suffering. He then was imprisoned in France before his exile to Damascus, where his heroism continued. During an attack in the city against Christians in 1860, Abd el-Kader saved thousands of Christians. He was given awards by France, Greece, and Turkey, and had a reputation in his time for being an educated humanitarian.

In this activity, we will think like historians as we examine Abd el-Kader and how he was seen by his contemporaries and the people in the modern world.

Something that historians do is compare different primary source accounts to try to get a whole picture of someone's life. These five documents provide you with a few different sources about Emir Abd el-Kader from his lifetime and after.

Directions:

- Carefully read the following documents.
- Answer each question as you go, as these questions will serve as guides to help you answer the final essay prompt:

How did different people or groups represent Emir Abd el-Kader over time?



Historical Background on Abd El Kader

Abdelkader Education Project

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.

Document 1

Source: Excerpt from *The Parlour Review, and Journal of Music, Literature and the Fine Arts*, published in Philadelphia on January 13, 1838

"Abd el-Kader is a man of great courage though his mind is rather legislative than military. Although his soul has been strongly schooled yet in the painful circumstances in which he has been frequently placed he has had some moments of depression. His morals are pure and rigid, he has but one wife whom he tenderly loves. His family consists of a daughter of four or five years old and a son born a short time before the entrance of the French into Mascara. When he was in the city he resided with his family in a sufficiently handsome house but not the palace. He lived without guards and altogether like a private individual. Every day at an early hour he repaired to the palace or beylik* to attend to the affairs of his government and give audience. In the evening he returned to his house and to privacy.

Abd el-Kader always dresses with simplicity. His costume is purely Arabian without any sort of ornament or mark of dignity the only luxury he displays is in his arms and horses. For some time he had a bournous** Moorish cloak of which the tassels were of gold but he cut them off in the following manner. One of his brothers in law whom he had made Kaid*** of a powerful tribe affected a show and state which excited murmurs. He sent for him and rebuking him for his conduct added, "Take example from me. I am richer and more potent than you and look how I am attired. I wish not to preserve even these miserable golden tassels which you see on my cloak." Saying this, he cut them off; and from that time he has not carried the smallest particle of gold or silver about him.

Abd el-Kader is fond of study to which he dedicates the few moments of leisure which his agitated life affords him and in all his expeditions he takes with him a little library. Then also his state is much more royal than it is in his capital. He dwells in a superb and convenient tent. A very elegant little study has been constructed in it where he works. When he is encamped and the day is not occupied in military operations he thus distributes his time. Entering into his tent after the march of the day he keeps but one domestic near him and devotes some moments to the cares of cleanliness. He then sends for his secretaries and his principal officers in succession and works with them until four o'clock then he presents himself at the entrance of the tent and says the public prayer, afterwards he preaches for half an hour taking care to choose a religious text which naturally leads him to those ideas which he wishes to diffuse in regard to politics and war. No one however is obliged to listen to his sermons. A few moments after he seats himself at table in company with his principal secretary, Miloud Ben Arach, his brothers when they are with the army and generally one of his agas.****"

*beylik = a Turkish word meaning "the territory under the jurisdiction of a Bey", basically a principality or mini state

**bournous = a long wool cloak with a hood, worn often by Algerians

***kaid = a tribal chief or governor of a district or group of villages in northern Africa

****aga = a turkish word meaning lord, master, respected man, or mister

Questions to help you analyze the document:

1. How does the author describe Abd-el-Kader's appearance and lifestyle?
2. What inferences can you draw about his moral character from this portrayal?
3. How does this writer's view of Abd el-Kader as a leader differ from that of the writer in *The London Times*?

Document 2

Source: Excerpt from Alexis de Toqueville's *Essay on Algeria*, written in 1841.

Alexis de Toqueville was a French person of the upper class. He was a foreign diplomat for France, and a writer. He wrote about political science, philosophies on politics, and history.

"...In order to turn these people to advantage, one must either destroy the tribal divisions in their hearts or excite in all the tribes at once a common passion that will hold them together artificially and violently, despite the vices of their social organization that are constantly dividing them.

Abd-el-Kader--clearly a character of the rarest and most dangerous sort, a mix of sincere and feigned enthusiasm, a sort of Muslim Cromwell*---has understood this marvelously. In all his external actions, he exhibits the prince far less than the saint: he constantly hides behind the interest of the religion for which he says he acts. It is as interpreter of the Koran, with the Koran in hand, that he orders and condemns; he preaches reform as much as obedience; his humility increases with his power. The religious hatred that we inspire created him, it raised him, it sustains him. To quell it would be to renounce his power. Therefore, he won't quell it but will constantly revive it, and he will always fight us, secretly or explicitly, because peace would leave the tribes to their natural instincts and soon dissolve the support on which he relies."

*Cromwell was a British Politician in the 1650s who worked to make his religious beliefs the rule of the state.

Questions to help you analyze the document:

1. How does de Toqueville's view of Abd el-Kader contrast with the view of the writer of the *Parlour Review* article?
2. Why do you think de Toqueville's view is different?
3. How does de Toqueville view the relationship between Islam and politics?
4. Do you think de Toqueville would feel the same way about religion and politics in his home country of France?

Document 3

Source: An article from The London Times, published on November 28, 1873 describing Abd el-Kader's leadership of the resistance to the French. (*Spaces have been added to help students. The original was one long paragraph in a newspaper.*)

"...For more than two years there was peace between the French and Abd-el-Kader. The former were engaged in the conquest of Constantine; the latter in the augmentation and consolidation of his military force. War broke out again in October, 1839, and Abd-el-Kader swept upon the French power with a ferocious resolution and resistless energy...

The whole fabric of French authority was shattered in an hour, and the European population found no safety, no centre of strength, save the walled cities and the intrenched camps. The valor of the European troops was signally displayed; but the Arabs were not driven back to their mountainous deserts till in 1841 Bugeaud* returned to the seat of war with full powers, large reinforcements, and a desperate purpose.

Then began that terrible warfare which has won for the Algerian veterans of France a doubtful fame. An army of 100,000 men, trained in the newest school of civilized war, and armed with all the resources of modern science, flung themselves on the brave but undisciplined Arabs. Scruples of mercy and tenderness were energetically cast aside, and the determination to strike terror into the rebels at whatever cost to humanity was proclaimed by Generals and eagerly accepted by soldiers. Over the darker deeds of that furious struggle history would willingly throw a veil; but justice may be done to the gallantry of Bugeaud's army and to the vigor of its commander.

Abd-el-Kader fought obstinately and bravely for empire and independence, but his power was steadily beaten down. One by one his strong-holds were wrested from him: his army melted, or rather was worn away, and before Bugeaud had been a twelvemonth in Algeria he had driven the Emir over the frontier into Morocco. The Moorish** Sultan was jealous of the French power, and aided Abd-el-Kader to raise another army, with which he twice invaded the Algerian territory. He was defeated, however, both by Gen. Bedeau and the Duc D' Aumale,*** and though for some years he carried on a sort of guerilla war on the borders, his hopes rapidly sank. Bugeaud resolved to put an end to Moorish intervention, and his invading army decisively defeated the Sultan on Isly, in August, 1844.

A treaty was the result, the terms including the expulsion of Abd-el-Kader from Morocco. Three years later, in spite of dauntless and desperate struggles, the troops of Gen. Lamoriciere succeeded in hunting down the fallen chief, who surrendered on the condition that he was to be allowed to retire in exile in Egypt or Syria."

*Thomas Robert Bugeaud = a Marshal of France and Governor-General of Algeria. He was known to commit war crimes during the conquest of Algeria.

**Moorish = used to refer to North African Muslims

***Duc D' Aumale = a soldier in the conquest of Algeria, was eventually Governor-General of Algeria.

Questions to help you analyze the document:

1. How does the writer describe Abd-el-Kader's military achievements?
2. How does the writer describe the military strategies of the French?
3. What language choices show what side of the battle he is sympathetic to?

Document 4

Source: Images of Emir Abd el-Kader.



Portrait of Abd el-Kader painted in 1852 by French artist Jean Baptiste Ange Tissier. (Currently in the Palace of Versailles, in France)



Portrait of Abd el-Kader painted in 1866 by Polish artist Stanislaw Chlebowski. (Currently in the Condé Museum in France.)

Questions to help you analyze the documents:

1. How was Jean Baptiste Ange Tissier representing Abd el Kader in 1852?
2. What do you observe about Stanislaw Chlebowski's representation of Abd el Kader in 1866?
3. How do these two pieces of art reflect the artists' views of Abd el-Kader?

Document 5:

Source: Images of statues of Abd el-Kader.



Statue of the Emir Abd el-Kader, constructed in 1987 in the city of Algiers in Algeria,



Emir Abd el-Kader Monument, unveiled with five other statues in 2021 in New York City is part of the public art campaign, "I Am Your Protector." (The statue is temporarily in Elkader, Iowa at City Hall in 2023.)

Questions to help you analyze the documents:

1. Why do you think the Algerian government had a statue of Abd el-Kader constructed in 1987?
2. Why do you think Abd el-Kader was chosen to be a part of a public art campaign focused on "protectors?"
3. What do these two statues display about his historical reputation?