

## Rumors in Damascus (A)

The rumors circulating in the ancient city of Damascus in March 1860 were ugly. There were few details, but when Emir Abd el-Kader heard threats of impending violence toward the Christian community, he was horrified. The local Christians were going to be collectively punished by the Ottoman authorities for refusing to pay taxes.

Four years earlier, European powers imposed reforms on the Ottoman Sultan as the price for restraining Russia's expansionist appetites in the Balkans at the end of the Crimean War. Among these reforms, the elimination of the *dhimmi* system was the one Ottoman authorities resented the most. The 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. Ignoring the edict, local Ottoman authorities continued to demand payment from Christians.

An ancient crossroads, 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.

Local authorities viewed the refusal to pay the head tax as evidence that Christians represented a fifth column whose loyalties were suspect. Governor Ahmed Pasha resolved to "correct" their insolence. He called a meeting of Druze leaders and local notables, including the *mufti* of Damascus. Abd el-Kader's informants reported that the agenda for the meeting was to counter the European-imposed reforms with intimidation.

Concerned, Abd el-Kader called on Michel Lanusse, the French consul and Arabist, who admired and trusted the Emir's source enough to convene a meeting of fellow consuls about the rumors. They decided to ask for an audience with Ahmed Pasha. He received them graciously and reassured them there was no basis for concern. However, in May 1860, the same rumors circulated again; this time, the reports came directly from Algerians loyal to Abd el-Kader who had followed him into exile. The plotters approached some of them to join in the scheme, and the Emir told his people to play along. A second meeting took place, but again, Ahmed Pasha assured the diplomats that there would be no violence.

Unlike the European diplomats, Abd el-Kader was not reassured. Twenty thousand 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.*"<sup>1</sup> 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.



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

At the end of May, the Emir again went to Lanusse, this time with precise details of the violent plot soon to break out. The French consul's fellow diplomats would not visit the governor a third time. At the Emir's request, Lanusse did something unusual, permissible only in emergencies: he used special embassy funds for the Emir to purchase weapons. Abd el-Kader's quiet life of teaching, scholarship, and reflection would soon come to an end.

### The Making of a Scholar and a Warrior

In 1907, 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 Abd el-Kader, "servant of the Almighty." From the beginning, Abd el-Kader was understood to have an exceptional destiny, one predicted by his grandmother and guided by his parents, Lalla Zohra and Muhi ala Din.

From Lalla Zohra, Abd el-Kader learned to read the 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 the 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 the arts of war: 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. They traveled through Tunis, Alexandria, Cairo, Sinai, Mecca, Damascus, and Baghdad. He met Jews in Cairo quite different from those at home and was surprised to encounter Arab Christians. In the 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 the Prophet Muhammad but diverged in some of their practices.

The French invaded Algiers in 1830, when Abd el-Kader 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 the capitulation agreement. Two years after the French arrived, tribes in the province of Oran elected Abd el-Kader's father, Muhi al-Din, to lead the struggle. His first act of leadership was to abdicate in favor of his son.

Under his father's guidance, Abd el-Kader 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



Emir Abd el-Kader  
Horace Vernet,  
Zoumeroff Collection

Ottoman Empire. Over the next fifteen years, Abd el-Kader 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. Accustomed to the traditional head count 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 soldiers guilty of mistreating prisoners would receive punishment of twenty-five strokes on the bottom of their feet with a cane.



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

By 1846, Abd el-Kader 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.”<sup>2</sup>

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, Abd el-Kader 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, he demanded that France send him into exile to another Muslim country. In return, Abd el-Kader promised never to return to Algeria for any reason. Known and respected in the field as a man who considered his word sacred, the Emir’s promise was believed. The diehards in his council submitted to the Emir’s judgment, and their seventeen-year struggle ended.

### In France

The offer of a truce from Abd el-Kader 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. 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 fields—a virtual mini-state. Not tempted by these offers, Abd el-Kader insisted France keep its word. If necessary, he was willing to die in prison.



*General Lamoricière. Location: Chateau de Chillon, Switzerland*

Throughout his tribulations, Abd el-Kader’s intellectual curiosity, stoicism, and willingness to address the French with respect won a wide 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, twenty-five members of his extended family of loyalists had died from pneumonia, tuberculosis, and depression.

## In Exile

Under the sponsorship of the French government, Abd el-Kader moved to Damascus with his family, together with loyal Algerian war veterans. He settled into a life of study, reflection and teaching in the great Umayyad Mosque. His home was a two story, thirty-room Tudor mansion on the Nakib Allée with a tiled interior courtyard, alabaster fountain, and rich history: it was once the residence of the great 12<sup>th</sup> century philosopher of universal love, Ibn Arabi.

However, on July 9, 1860, the relative peace of Abd el-Kader's home in exile was shattered. The rumored plans to attack Christians proved true. Abd el-Kader's appeal for arms to Michel Lanusse at 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, Abd el-Kader'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."<sup>3</sup>*

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As Emir Abd el--Kader told to biographer C.H. Churchill and recounted in Charles Henry Churchill, *Emir Abd--el Kader, ex sultan of Algeria*, (Chapman & Hall, 1867); and Churchill found in Kiser, John W. *Commander of the Faithful, the Life and Times of Emir Abd el--Kader*, Monkfish Book Publishing Co., 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.