

Emir Abd el-Kader

Rumors in Damascus

Teaching and Discussion Guide

CASE MATERIALS
Case A presents a moral and religious dilemma faced by Emir Abd el- Kader. Participants are asked to read the case in preparation for a discussion of context, characters, and the decision dilemma. (Please note: Discussion of Case A is done without having Case B in hand.)
Case B is distributed in preparation for a subsequent discussion, after Case A has been studied and discussed. Case B recounts Abd el-Kader's actual decision and what he said about it after the fact.
This Teaching and Discussion Guide includes suggestions for teachers and facilitators. This Guide is accompanied by a catalogue of the Consequences and Legacy of Abd el Kader's decisions, over the last 150 years. These are resources are intended to deepen historical knowledge and make further connections to contemporary moral/religious dilemmas.

Pedagogical Objectives of *Rumors in Damascus*

As the protagonist, Emir Abd el-Kader's decisions and the impact of those decisions, provide the framework for teaching and for fostering dialogue among students and civic and religious groups. The case study introduces an important Muslim historical figure whose legacy of moral courage and leadership is not widely known. The case does not attempt to provide answers or proper conclusions, but instead offer an opportunity for students and citizens to consider decision-making under conditions of uncertainty.

Places ¹	Words and Concepts
Oran, Algiers	Qur'an - central (revealed) religious text of Islam
France	Sunnah - the acts and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed
Damascus	Hadith - saying of the Prophet
	Dhimmi - historical term for a non-Muslim 'protected' citizen of a Muslim state
People	Emir - commander, general, or prince
Prophet Mohammed	Kurds - ethnic group belonging to Kurdistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria
Lalla Zohra and Muhi al Din	Exile - forced resettlement or deportation from one's homeland
Ibn Arabi	Druze - "the People of Monotheism;" a branch of Shi'a Islam
General Lamoricière	Colonialism - the policy or practice of full or partial political control over another country, occupying it and exploiting it economically
Michel Lanusse	Ottoman Empire - in power from 1299 until after WWI

¹ Clicking on hyperlinks in this document will direct the reader to essays for further reading within the Pluralism Project's online resource [On Common Ground: World Religions in America](#).

Select Themes and Possible Discussion Questions

Depending on their context, users of this case study may find different components of the narrative to be relevant; however, there are some key issues these cases aim to raise, without resorting to easy answers. These key themes include:

- **Moral/Religious Courage and Risky Decision-Making**

After his 17-year battle with Christian French imperial powers in Algeria, why does Abd el-Kader decide to save Christians in Damascus? This is the essence of the case.

- Outline and discuss what Abd el-Kader did and why.
- How did Abd el-Kader understand the risks of saving the Christians? Of not saving them?
- What teachings or resources, if any, did Abd el-Kader access?
- Some criticize Abd el-Kader for surrendering to the French in Algeria. Why not “give up” the Christians as well? How did Abd el-Kader understand his commitments?
- Do you think the Emir had doubts? If so, what might they have been?

- **Bridging Religious and National Boundaries**

In the United States and around the world, the boundaries of a particular religious tradition or nation can often seem thick and impermeable. Abd el-Kader’s story invites us to question how these boundaries are drawn and the ways in which religious and national identities impact how we engage with our neighbors.

- Reflect: What are the boundaries of *my religion* and *my nation*?
- Consider: What responsibilities, if any, come with understanding our boundaries to be permeable?

- **Jihad**

The narrative arc of Abd el-Kader’s story offers the opportunity to engage in a conversation around *jihad*, a term that is frequently [used and misused in common parlance](#), in the media, and in propagandistic materials. To tease out the meaning of *jihad* in this case, participants might reflect on the many ways Emir Abd el-Kader struggles in this story.

- Discuss how Abd el-Kader’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?
- For some young Algerians, Abd el-Kader’s reputation is tarnished. Some asked “What are you telling us...to give up?” and were troubled that he did not fight to the death. Is there tension in this story between obedience and agency? Discuss.

- **Emir Abd el-Kader's Relevance Today**

- Are there lessons in Abd el-Kader's story for Muslims and non-Muslims alike? If so, what are some of these lessons?
- How might the foreign policy decisions, historical and contemporary, of various nations be viewed in light of this story? In what ways does this story invite us to consider anew the impact of
 - U.S. military action in places like Iraq and Afghanistan?
 - The French Revolution and colonialism, both dominate themes during el-Kader's lifetime?
 - These colonial legacies in places like Damascus where, in 2014, Syria is engaged in an ongoing civil war?
- What are the resonances of this story for interfaith relations today?

For further reading on Abd el-Kader and the historical context in which he lived, please consult the [selected bibliography](#) compiled by the Abd el-Kader Education Project, Inc.

Catalogue of the Consequences and Legacy of Emir Abd el-Kader

Even during his lifetime, Emir Abd el-Kader was respected near and far for his leadership and courage. Below are select examples of the numerous and varied ways his actions inspired.

While Abd el-Kader fought the French:

- An American lawyer, Timothy Davis, establishes Elkader, Iowa USA in 1846.
- Citizens of Bordeaux place his name on the French presidential ballot while he was still prisoner of the French government.
- The winning racehorse of the British National Steeple Chase in 1851 is named “Little Ab.” In 1863, Abd el-Kader co-authored *Horses of the Sahara* with General Eugene Daumas (a must-read classic for equestrians).
- British poet William Thackeray dedicates his poem *The Caged Hawk* to Abd el-Kader.
- British military attaché, Charles Henry Churchill, seeks out Abd el-Kader to write his biography.

After Abd el-Kader’s intervention in Damascus:

- France awards him the Legion of Honor.
- U.S. President Abraham Lincoln gifts him with rare Colt pistols.
- Pope Pius IX and European heads of state bestow upon him medals of recognition.
- He is invited to French Masonic Lodge Henry IV, joining Franklin, Lafayette, Laplace, Monge, Talleyrand.
- His presence is requested at the opening of Suez Canal in 1869, after he assisted in getting Arab support for the project, a short-lived symbol of East-West cooperation.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson references the Emir in his collected essays *Society and Solitude*:

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.²

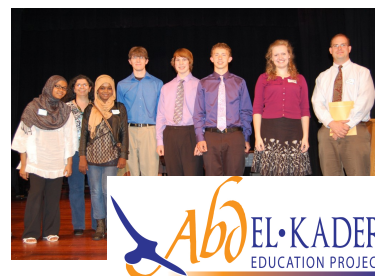
² Excerpted from the *Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Society and Solitude* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1870), 271.

- A ship, *The Abd el-Kader*, is launched in Newburyport, Massachusetts.
- In February 1883, an eight-hundred word obituary for the Emir is published in the *New York Times*. It concludes the Emir was “one of the few great men of the century.”
- Another town called Elkader, this one in Kansas, is established in 1887.³

During the 20th and 21st Century:

- Abd el-Kader’s *Book of Stops*, a commentary on writings of Ibn Arabi, is published.
- The United Nations sponsors conference in April 2006 in Place of Nations, entitled *Abd el-Kader, forerunner of human rights and champion of interreligious dialogue*. Peter Maurer, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross commented that “Abd el-Kader is the undisputed leader in the codification of modern international humanitarian law.”
- Elkader, Iowa and Mascara, Algeria become Sister Cities in 1985. President Boutafilka, in 2008, sends \$150,000 in unsolicited aid to citizens of Elkader recovering from flood damage.
- In 2007 Muhammad Khan Nasir, editor of Pakistani monthly *Al-Sharia*, summarizes his view of Abd el-Kader’s importance:

... 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 can put himself in his adversaries’ shoes and look 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.”⁴



As of 2013, Nasir had come under attack from Taliban militants for upholding Abd el-Kader as model Muslim.

- In 2010, author John Kiser launches an essay contest in Iowa high schools and colleges. Today, Elkader, Iowa is the headquarters of the Abd el-Kader Education Project, directed by Kathy Garms.
- Kiser’s *Commander of the Faithful* inspired Elsa Marston to write for young adults, *The Compassionate Warrior* (Wisdom Press, 2012).

³ This town is no longer inhabited.

⁴ Excerpt from Nasir’s review of *Commander of the Faithful: Life and Times of Emir Abdelkader*, by John Kiser (Monkfish Books 2008). This book was translated into Urdu in 2010 by M.K. Nasir.

- Ahmed Bouyerdene's book *Abd el-Kader, Hero and Saint of Islam* (Wisdom Press, 2012) is translated into English from French.
- In 2012, Fouad Chergui, president of the French social justice organization (CLAP), proposes to mayor of Lyon and President Hollande that the Emir's example be used to exemplify moral courage to heal domestic wounds, beginning with an Abdelkader essay contest for students and an annual public celebration similar to Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.
- In November 2013 the Algerian Agency for Cultural Influence and Hollywood's American Society for Independent Cinema sign a co-production agreement for an epic feature-length film. Director Charles Burnett began filming in Algeria.
- That same year the University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Studies in Culture selects its first Abd el-Kader Memorial Leadership Scholarship recipient, Jeffrey Guhin, whose research is a comparison of catholic school and *madrassa* pedagogies.



Abd el-Kader Monument in Oran, Algeria (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

- Imam Mohammed Lazzouni, Board Chair of *Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations*, Merrimack College (an Augustinian institution in North Andover, Massachusetts) remarks: *"The climax of the Abd el-Kader story is the start of something new ... just as everyone now accepts Augustinian teachings as universal. It takes a narrative to appropriate a perspective ... Abd el-Kader offers that possibility."* Thagaste (now Souk Ahras, Algeria) is birthplace of St. Augustine.
- The Marine Corps Scholarship Foundation establishes an endowed Abd el-Kader Leadership scholarship in 2013 for college age children of Marines killed or incapacitated. The Marine Corps University also utilizes teachings from Abd el-Kader's campaigns and conduct.
- Currently, officials at the Federal Bureau of Prisons are considering the use of *Commander of the Faithful* as an aid to rehabilitate inmates in the U.S. federal prison system.
- Islamic Network Group (ING) in San Jose, California will soon launch online lesson plans about Abd el-Kader's life.

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