



## THE BIRTH OF AN ISLAMIC LEADER

Abd el-Kader might well have been a mokaddem who resolved such disputes, but he was born into a marabout tribe where piety and study were more valued than plunder and glory. His destiny, had it been his to guide, would have been that of a married monk, living a life of prayer, meditation and teaching.

Who, indeed, was this marabout who became a formidable warrior, but in the end put his trust in the word of a French general, believing that submission to France was the will of God?

Marabout. The word confused the French soldiers. Was it a person or a thing? Both, they learned eventually. A marabout is a holy man, a man “tied to religion.” It is also his tomb, but may be a 500-year-old oak tree thought by the common people to possess miraculous healing powers. Typically, it is a domed, white-washed mausoleum surrounded by a low mud wall, visited by the poor, frequently women who come to pray for intercession or simply need an excuse to leave the confinement of their homes by seeking the company of someone who is safely dead, but known to have been learned and saintly.

*Maraboutism* is still widespread in North Africa today, and is strongly rooted in rural populations and among the less-educated believers. Muslim reformers have considered these practices a degenerate form of Islam, full of superstitious and magical beliefs that border on the worship of men. There is no God but God. Idolatry is the supreme sin of Islam. It was into a distinguished marabout family living in the remote Turkish beylik of Oran, in what was known as the Regency of Algiers, that Abd el-Kader was born in September 1808, though some say it was May, 1807.

A cacophony of cries, chants and incantations could be heard from Lalla Zohra’s retinue of female relatives and servants gathered in her strong smelling goatskin tent. The most fervent were those of her Negro servant, Mohra. She would be the baby’s wet nurse and prayed more loudly than the others for her mistress that this be a boy. Zohra was served a cup of linden tea mixed with clove sticks, thyme and cinnamon to accelerate the contractions. Servants were throwing handfuls of salt in the corners of the tent to keep away evil jinns lurking in the darkness.

“Flap your wings, Oh angel of God, help deliver this child, protect it with your wings, deliver this child,” the midwife chanted as she brought a pot of boiling water to Zohra. Zohra’s sister-in-law prayed to their patron saint, Abd el-Kader al-Jilani. “Push, Lalla Zohra! Push!” The head emerged. It was covered with hair, a good sign. “It’s a boy. Praise be to God. Allahu Akbar! Alhamdulillah!”

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## THE FIRST EIGHT YEARS

Zohra was the second of Muhi al-Din's three wives. She was well educated for a woman of her time. Not only could she read and write, which was rare even in Europe in the early 19th century, she was schooled in the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet. People called her "Lalla," a title of respect owed to her reputation for generosity, learning and piety. Some Arabs considered her a marabout.

His mother taught Abd el-Kader to read the Koran, to write and to make his own clothes. She showed him how to perform the ritual ablutions that precede daily prayers. They were always in threes: the hands were washed first, then the mouth by gargling, followed by the nostrils, the face from forehead to chin, the arms up to the elbows, then rinsing of the hair from the forehead to the neck, ears inside and out, and finally the feet, beginning always with the right side.

"Ritual purity is half of faith," his mother would tell him. It was both symbol and reminder, a reminder of the other, harder half — to purify one's inner self. To be a good Muslim and become an instrument of God's will, it was necessary to be free of egotistical desires and unruly passions. Zohra also taught him the dangers of mechanical ritualism. He had to pray with his heart and not only his lips. "Don't be like your father's assistant who is like a rooster," she told him. "He knows the hours of prayer but he doesn't know how to pray."

Zohra disapproved of the gossip, erotic conversation and constant tittering of her servants and sisters-in-law. Nor did she like their superstitious ways. She wanted to be sure her son did not believe the foolishness his black nurse Mohra told him about monsters and demons, even if she thought it useful to believe a little bit in demons, particularly those within, and to believe in Hell and the Day of Judgment.

Piety, and learning to fear God, had everyday implications. Life, Zohra explained, is hierarchical and submission needs to be practiced daily, to God and then to each other, according to rank. Each person should submit to the authority above, beginning with the angels and sultans, down to pilgrims and slaves. When before higher authority, one should be silent.

At the age of eight, Abd el-Kader passed from his mother's world over to the all-male world of his father. Circumcision marked the passage, a rite that renewed the original pact of obedience between God and their ancestor, Abraham. Henceforth, he too would practice obedience to God's will.

According to time-honored tradition, the day Abd el-Kader officially entered manhood began with a prayer at dawn. With his palms turned to the heavens, Muhi al-Din beseeched God for peace and protection from idolatry. A ceremonial meal was prepared, accompanied by the sounds of oboes, tambourines and flutes while Muhi al-Din spoke to the elder of each group of guests who had come to honor him.

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## THEOLOGY AND THE PROPHET

Father now replaced mother as teacher, as tradition required. Abd el-Kader was invited to all-male gatherings to observe, listen and learn in silence. Every morning, Muhi al-Din taught Abd el-Kader the traditions of the Prophet Mohammed, or Sunna, those saying and actions of the Prophet that had been recorded by at least three credible witnesses. Always wanting to know “why,” he also studied the commentaries of the great religious scholars who had wrestled with the different meanings that could be extracted from the Koran, interpreted in the to know “why,” he also studied the commentaries of the great religious scholars who had wrestled with the different meanings that could be extracted from the Koran, interpreted in the light of the Prophet’s own deeds and words.

The scholars often disagreed, his father explained, but where there was disagreement and ambiguity, there should also be latitude. Though ambiguity could be exploited by evildoers, and was condemned in the Koran, it was not necessarily bad either. Ambiguity, Muhi al-Din noted, also provided room for growth, flexibility and change. When Abd el-Kader turned thirteen, he was qualified as an authorized commentator of the Koran and of the hadith, those thousands of sayings attributed to the Prophet. He had become a religious instructor, a taleb. His family began to call him by the honorific diminutive, Si Kada.

Muhi al-Din educated his son in the tradition of their patron saint, Abd el-Kader al-Jilani.

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## PILGRIMAGE

The pilgrims passed below Constantine, so named for the Roman emperor who made Christianity the state religion of his empire, then on toward Tunis where they would sail to Alexandria. Along the way, Abd el-Kader saw the silent ruins of Thagast, birthplace of Saint Augustine, the son of a Roman father and a Berber mother.

In Tunis, Abd el-Kader met his first Frenchman. Captain Jovas, the boat's captain, spoke a curious patois of Arabic, Maltese and French. It had not occurred to the sheltered Abd el-Kader that knowledge of the world could be expressed in languages other than Arabic and Greek. He asked his father if knowledge was not limited by the existence of different languages. Muhi al-Din reminded him of the holy book of the Jews and the Christians. God punished the people at Babel for trying to unite what God wanted separated. The Koran revealed the same message: *If he wanted a single community he would have made one... He created different peoples and tribes so they would have to learn to get to know one another and to compete in good works.*

"You are going to see places where there are many Christians and Jews. Don't forget they received God's Revelation before we did. Abraham, he was a Muslim," his father explained.

"How could he be a Muslim before Islam?"

"Because he submitted to the will of God. A Muslim is one who submits to God."

"Are Jews and Christians Muslims?"

"Yes, certainly, when they seek sincerely to do God's will. '...Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...' is a part of a prayer the prophet Jesus gave to the Christians."

Abd el-Kader discovered in Alexandria a Babel of cultures and religions he had never imagined. There were the multifarious Christians: Orthodox Greeks, Catholics, Armenians, Copts and, amazingly, Christian Arabs. All were different, yet all the same in their adoration of Jesus. The Jews were different from those he knew in the Maghreb, yet similar. Abd el-Kader met Muslims from various schools of legal thinking and ways of interpreting God's word. For several days the young Maghrebin peppered with his endless questions the scholars who had invited his father to meet with them, only to be surprised by the lively intellect of his teenage son.

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## THE MONKS OF JESUS

From Cairo they followed in the footsteps of the prophet Moses to Mt. Sinai, where they found hospitality as guests at the monastery of Saint Catherine. For hours they talked with the monks about the unity of God and the diversity of His paths. The monks also insisted that God was one, but three-in-one — a triangle, but still one. They explained that God became human and suffered as a human to show His creatures the face of His love. Abd el-Kader understood that Jesus was to the Christians what the Koran was to the Muslims — direct Revelation. Jesus was the voice of God, made flesh. Jesus Christ was the Way; like the Prophet, an example.

But how could God have allowed his son to be killed? Don't the Christians make a cult of Jesus, a man, making him an associate of God? Aren't they really polytheists? But, if God is all encompassing, all knowing and all powerful, why can't God become a man if God wills it? To these questions Abd el-Kader had no sure answer. Islam had ninety-nine names for God, but that did not mean there were ninety-nine gods. He knew only that God is One. God is God. But like the sun, cannot His light be reflected in different colors?

The Koran revealed that Abraham and his son Ishmael built the Kaaba in Mecca, the great black cube in the center of the sanctuary where the many become one. The diversity of the Muslim pilgrims astonished Abd el-Kader. There were black, brown, yellow and fair-skinned Muslims, men and women, from all over the world: Arabs, Moors, Black Africans, Turks, Persians, Indians, Javanese, and even Tartars and Bukharans from Central Asia. Around the Kaaba, however, they were one: bound together in their common garb of the seamless white gown worn by the Prophet and by their desire to please God.

Once inside the sanctuary after six days of preparation, father and son joined the orderly mass of humanity that spiraled seven times around the Kaaba — swirling gyres whose circumference was nowhere and everywhere. Abd el-Kader remembered the words of his former master at Arzew, Si Ben Tahar: God created order from chaos using geometry. Forms. Plato. Euclid. With geometry, the clever Greeks had measured the circumference of the earth and demonstrated mathematical truths that transcended their imperfect, warped reality. Circling the Kaaba, Abd el-Kader had understood.

They pressed on to Syria. In Damascus, his father arranged for Abd el-Kader to study under the famous sheik Khalid al-Naqshbandi whose Sufi brotherhood had been founded in Central Asia in the 14th century and became widely influential in the Middle East and India. A theme he returned to with the sheik was the same one he had struggled with by himself: how to square the plurality of ways with God's unity.

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## PEOPLE AND ORIGINS

Al-Jilani taught that men fell into two classes: those who practice obedience to God and those who are rebellious. The former are at peace and happy, doing good deeds in a state of obedient devotion. The latter are those who are in a state of insecurity and misery because the desires of the ego and the flesh dominate in rebellion against God's prescriptions. In each human being, both obedience and rebelliousness are present, but they are unstable conditions. People can change. The good may turn into evil and the evil into good. If purity of heart, sincerity and good deeds dominate, then one's selfish characteristics can be transformed and rebelliousness can be overcome. One who is rebellious but recognizes his errors and changes can be transformed into an obedient servant of God. Like the Christian monks and priests whom the Koran mentions as holding a special place of respect, so too for al-Jilani: obedience, humility and charity mark the good path. Above all, is obedience.

Al-Jilani was loved and consulted by caliphs and paupers alike, and at the time of his death in 1166 A.D., was already recognized as a saint. His tomb attracted worshippers from all over the Muslim world. Located between the Tigris and Euphrates — the two rivers which gave birth to civilization — the city's lush gardens, orchards and bright cupolas must have been a relief to the wind-and-sand blown pilgrims who had trekked from Damascus for thirty days. In Baghdad, the father passed his baton to his son.

Muhi al-Din asked Abd el-Kader to lead the discussions with local scholars and hosts. Soon word spread of the amazing knowledge and intellectual agility of this young Maghrebin who could politely hold his own with the leading scholars of the city. It was said that he was even giving lessons to the graybeards. When asked about his genealogy, he replied as his father had taught him: don't ask about a man's origins, but about his life, his actions and his character and you will know who he is; if the water taken from a river is good, so too is its source.

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## THE FLYSWATTER INCIDENT

The provocation had occurred in 1827 at the annual reception marking the Feast of Abraham, held in the dey's Moorish palace overlooking the port from the summit of the Casbah. Dey Hussein had asked the French consul about the long-overdue debt of twenty-four million gold francs that France owed the firm of Bushnach and Bacri. These two Jewish families had grown from being owners of a small épicerie in Algiers to becoming wealthy international grain merchants and bankers to the dey. The dey, who had supported their claims in the past, reminded the consul that Bushnach and Bacri had supplied wheat to the revolutionary French government when Europe's monarchies were trying to suffocate it. They had financed the feeding of Napoleon's armies. Hussein was annoyed that King Charles X had never responded to his letter proposing a compromise over the back interest.

In front of the dey's entourage, the consul, Pierre Deval, superciliously reminded Hussein that the French king didn't write letters to his inferiors. The offended Turk struggled to control himself before swatting the Frenchman in the face with his fly fan, calling him an "insolent infidel." The consul was recalled to Paris, and, escalating the affair further, the dey made all French citizens leave. Charles ordered a naval blockade of the city, explained to the public as a retaliatory measure to restore "French honor." Yet, few people believed it was anything but a pretext for the government to distract a disgruntled public with a foreign adventure. The insult was intentional.

Charles was unpopular. His government had tried to turn back the clock and undo twenty-five years of revolution and reform. The renewed influence of the clergy and of former royalists was disturbing to those who had enjoyed bathing in the fresh waters of secular republicanism. His ministers were not responsible to the parliament. The new, affluent middle class was unhappy — excluded, as it was, from an electorate of only ninety thousand large landowners. The economy was suffering and the government's finances were in shambles. A naval blockade was a warm up to prepare the public for an invasion, one that would require three years of planning.

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## WAR AS A DISTRACTION

A little war to punish an uppity Turk would shore up support at home, burnish the restored Bourbon dynasty's faded glory and, of course, serve the cause of Christian civilization. A coalition was formed. A crusade was announced to root out slavery and piracy, and end the humiliating payment of tribute to this nest of thieves. Its chief rival, Great Britain, abstained, but France proceeded with the blessing of Austria-Hungary, Prussia, Russia, Holland and the Vatican.

In France, opposition voices became louder as the invasion date drew near. The republican left feared the adventure's real purpose was to get the nation drunk on smoke and gunpowder before the new parliamentary elections took place in July 1830. A glorious little war would also curry favor with the army in case the monarchy needed it to beat down domestic enemies.

In May, the influential *Le Journal des Débats* summarized the counterarguments:

Let reason try to tell us what we are doing in Africa. Is it to seek glory? What glory is there in attacking Arabs in poorly fortified towns that cannons can easily demolish? Can one speak of glory when 35,000 French soldiers face a garrison of 5,000 demoralized Janissaries? Is it for the glory of our sailors in the face of pirates who can't sail a bark? The glory of our officers defeating imbecilic tribal chiefs of barbarian hordes? So, is it a point of honor? But have the insults and impertinences of the dey hurt France? The interests of Christianity? They are nonexistent, just as are the supposed acts of piracy.<sup>4</sup> The expedition will be easy but what will we gain? What is really behind the undertaking? A system of illusions and deceptions which have pushed our poor country to the edge of the abyss. There are bad ministers without a majority in the chambers, without a majority in the electoral colleges who foolishly think they can escape their fate with grapeshot and empty glory.

Neither side, however, was allowed to express doubt about the success of the mission. To question the capacity of the French soldier was unpatriotic.

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## PLUNDER AND OCCUPATION

The ordinary soldiers, like those everywhere, were not concerned with lofty ideas about the unity of races and peoples. More practical needs were on their minds: firewood, water, shelter and opportunities for plunder. Orchards, forests and wainscoting in houses were burned for fuel, mosques turned into stables, palaces and villas became caserns. “Perhaps never, even in the age of the barbarians, has there been an occupation carried out with such disorder as that of Algiers. The hordes of the north who grabbed the remnants of the Roman Empire behaved with more reason and wisdom,” wrote Lamoricière’s fellow officer, Pellissier de Reynaud, who would also make his career in Algeria and leave for posterity his voluminous memoirs.

No plan for administration had been anticipated. Many Turkish administrators simply abandoned their posts, not knowing if they were expected to serve the new masters and not knowing where to turn. Most simply disappeared when they learned the dey had departed for Alexandria with his family as part of the secret capitulation terms that gave Bourmont and certain officers access to the fabled treasury of the Casbah.

How did the dey manage to leave after submitting so abjectly to Bourmont? “If one tolerates a little pillage,” Pellissier explained, “that only serves to cover the big pillage. pillage was certainly the treasure of the dey.” Hussein’s only bargaining leverage with Bourmont was the threat to blow up the treasury containing huge quantities of gold, silver, diamonds, jewelry and merchandise. A value of forty-eight million gold francs was placed on the treasure, which was officially transferred to the French government. Its true value would never be known. Bourmont’s officers used compromising documents to light their pipes and otherwise destroyed papers that could reveal the true value of the treasury.

While soldiers plundered the city, France yawned. The Paris Bourse did not respond favorably to the news of the military success, new parliamentary elections went ahead as planned, and the minister president of the royal council opened talks with the Sultan about possibly giving back Algiers. In return, France would keep certain coastal towns.

Upon learning of the fall of Algiers, the tribes, too, were at first indifferent. Invaders had come and gone over the past centuries. Yet most were pleased to see their Turkish oppressors flee.

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## FIGHTER TO LEADER

Hostility against France was needlessly sharpened by the harsh methods of General Pierre Boyer, the new commander in Oran. Boyer had fought guerilla warfare during Napoleon's ill-considered Spanish campaign. "To bring civilization, sometimes it is necessary to use uncivilized methods" was his rationalization for the harsh reprisals that won him his sobriquet, "Pierre the Cruel."

He practiced collective punishment of tribes suspected of cooperating with the blockade of Oran that Muhi al-Din had ordered. The tribes in the area were not to sell food or forage to the French garrison, otherwise dependent on irregular supplies from France. Acting on bad information, Boyer often attacked the wrong villages, and then paraded heads on poles to intimidate the natives in their own grisly manner. But the Frenchman's aggressive sorties outside of Oran were temper tantrums that had no lasting effect.

In November 1832, the leaders of the tribes asked Muhi al-Din to officially be their sultan and to unify the struggle against the invader. But he had other ideas. When the chiefs of the seven tribes living around the plain of Ghriss came to Muhi al-Din with their petition, he slyly agreed.

"You know, I am a man of peace. I have given my life to God. The task you are asking of me requires bloodletting and brutal force. But if you insist, I accept to be your sultan. My first decision is to abdicate in favor of my son, Abd el-Kader. "He is young, intelligent, just, and capable of continuing the struggle. He will do it better than me. I am too old and not suited for this job. Help him, so that he may be a father to the youngest of you, a son to the older, and a brother to his equals."

Muhi al-Din's decision was greeted with shouts of approval. Abd el-Kader had proven his courage and stamina many times over during the past two years. He had also become a trusted advisor to his father. Abd el-Kader had distinguished himself during the spring and summer when his father launched attacks on French forts around Oran. The young marabout had attracted attention when the Arab infantry fighting in ditches below the walls of Fort St. Philippe ran out of ammunition. While other cavalymen hung back and watched, afraid of French cannon fire, Abd el-Kader raced back and forth on his black mare across open fields of fire, using his burnoose as a huge basket to carry fresh cartridges to the trapped men. At other times, he dismounted and led infantry armed only with old flintlock rifles, knives and slingshots. His bravery inspired the timid into action. Abd el-Kader lost a horse and an earlobe during those days, yet he gained an aura of future leadership and a reputation for his miraculous ability to avoid getting hit by the "black couscous."

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## PREACHER AND TEACHER

Abd el-Kader had absorbed his father's conviction that he had been born with a divine destiny to fulfill. His life had to be an example for others. The five daily prayers, sermons and frequent homilies he preached at marabout shrines offered occasions to teach his compatriots respect for the laws of their religion and to set themselves apart from the Christians by holding to higher moral standards. With knowledge and exemplary behavior, he could achieve moral leadership — a necessary, but not sufficient condition to lead. The Commander of the Faithful also needed to show the tribes his political cleverness, courage in battle and skill in dealing with the French. Islam is like a tree: it points its believers heavenward, but is also rooted in the earth.

The “puny Arab” that de Tocqueville recognized as a remarkable leader was, in fact, physically small. Not much over five feet tall, Abd el-Kader was wiry, exceptionally strong for his size and had an iron constitution. He could ride for weeks surviving on a sack of the same barley they fed their horses. Precooked, the barley could be molded by hand when mixed with water into a doughy ball of *rouina* — the fast food staple of Arab horsemen.

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## THE FIRST PEACE AMONG ENEMIES

A month later a third letter arrived from Desmichels. This time he wrote what Abd el-Kader needed — words to give the tribes that proved it was the French who were humbly suing for peace. “...Not having received a response to my last letter, I prefer to think it never reached you than to believe that you judged it unworthy of your attention...If you desire to preserve the dominant situation where circumstances have favored you, you cannot do better than to accept my request for a meeting, so that the tribes might devote themselves to the land and enjoy the fruits and blessings of peace in the shade of treaties which would firmly bind us to one another.”

The emir now had a document showing that the enemy was the first to seek peace. The Koran was clear on two points Abd el-Kader would revisit often in his dealings with both tribes and the French: if attacked, a Muslim must fight to his last breath to defend the faith, yet peace is permitted if the invader sues for peace. This time, Abd el-Kader accepted the general’s proposal. His reply to Desmichels’ letter was gracious and ended with his promise. “...You can be certain that I have never betrayed my word, once given. With God’s help, these negotiations will be to the advantage of both sides.”

On February 4, 1834, the emir’s representative, Miloud Ben Arrach, met with Desmichels’ intermediary. Ben Arrach had become a trusted councilor to Abd el-Kader, and become his de facto foreign minister. Ben Arrach combined administrative experience, intelligence and powerful tribal connections, powerful enough that the former Bey Hassan had made him his agha for the eastern part of the beylik. Ben Arrach had also maintained good relations with the Jewish merchants who served as the emir’s secret agents. Thus, it was Ben Arrach who proposed to Desmichels that he use Mordecai Amar as his intermediary.

The use of Jewish intermediaries was practical. They were excellent linguists, more cosmopolitan than the Arabs and practiced in working with Europeans. Accustomed to commerce, they knew both sides had to benefit for an agreement to occur. And they understood the ways of the Arabs. Mordecai Amar was an Oranais merchant who was well known to Abd el-Kader. He sold their wheat and procured weapons for them through commercial channels in Britain and Spain and kept the emir informed about French thinking.

Ben Arrach returned to the emir with unsigned draft peace proposals from Desmichels. After consulting with his council, Abd el-Kader sent Ben Arrach back to Oran on February 25th with his seal stamped on the proposals of Desmichels and a new document with his own proposals. Ben Arrach was instructed not to give back the general’s proposals until he had first put his seal on the additional proposals of Abd el-Kader.

Desmichels’ terms had contained six points: 1) immediate cessation of hostilities; 2) assuring respect for the religion and customs of Muslims; 3) return of prisoners held by the emir; 4) open markets for commerce; 5) return of French deserters by the Arabs, and 6) Christians traveling within the province must have a passport bearing the seal of the emir’s consul in Oran and of the French general in command of Oran.



Abd el-Kader presented four additional conditions that either expanded or limited those of Desmichels:

- 1) Arabs were free to buy and sell gunpowder, guns and all other necessities of waging war;
- 2) commerce in Arzew is under the jurisdiction of the Commander of the Faithful; the shipping and receiving of all merchandise for Oran, Mostaganem and Arzew must go through Arzew;
- 3) the general must return deserters and not harbor criminals, and
- 4) no Muslim residing in the French-controlled towns will be prevented from leaving if he so wishes.

As instructed, Ben Arrach handed back Desmichels' conditions bearing the emir's seal only after Desmichels had attached his seal to the emir's terms. This gave rise to a peace agreement in two parts. The next day, Desmichels proposed consolidating the two documents into one agreement.

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