

Book Reviews

Who Commands the Faithful?

Review Article by Joseph V. Montville

Commander of the Faithful: The Life and Times of Emir Abd El-Kader, by John W. Kiser. Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish Book Publishing Company, 2008. xviii + 323 pages. Bibl. to p. 346. Index to p. 361. \$28.95.

In February 1856, the three-year Crimean War in which Britain, France, the Kingdom of Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire had fought against Russia's moves toward expanding its influence symbolically over the Christian holy places in Ottoman Jerusalem came to an end. In truth, the war was just the latest stage of the struggle among Christian states and empires for advantage, as the Ottoman "Sick Man of Europe" declined further. One of the many consequences of Crimean War diplomacy was the proclamation by the Ottoman Sultan of an edict called Hatti Humayun. This reform would give the empire's Christians and Jews equality before the law, doing away with the traditional dhimmi, protected, but disadvantaged, status of these minorities. The new situation would allow Christians and Jews to testify in Muslim courts, have access to government positions, and participate in the Ottoman army. Significantly, it would relieve the minorities of the need to pay the jizya, or head tax, which had been their burden since the earliest days of Islam.

Backed by the growing influence and self-confidence of the European powers, Maronite Christians in Lebanon stopped paying their jizya, even though the Ottoman authorities had ignored the reforms of Hatti Humayun. As John Kiser explains in his monumental study of the life of Emir Abd el-Kader [Amir 'Abd al-Qadir], the legendary Algerian nationalist who raised tribes to fight the French occupation of his country from 1832 to 1847, Turkish authorities wanted their ten shillings per Christian and had no interest in having them in the army. This tension led to a plot by the governor of Damascus, Ahmed Pasha, to teach the Christians a lesson by organizing a pogrom to be led by Druze warriors with the help of Arab, Kurdish, and Druze street people. Abd el-Kader, in French-financed, comfortable, and respected exile in Damascus — having voluntarily surrendered to the French in Algeria in 1847 after concluding that further fighting would be futile and result in the deaths of many more innocents — had developed a defense plan against the anti-Christian pogrom with the French consul. The latter had provided funds to arm a thousand of his Algerian fighters.

Ahmed Pasha had little trouble in arousing a mob of Muslims who had already been incensed by Christian European powers who pushed around, bullied, and occupied Muslims lands (cf. 20th century Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran, and Iraq). On July 9, 1860, mobs attacked the Christian neighborhoods of Damascus, and Abd el-Kader went to the rescue. He already had brought the Russian, American, Dutch, and Greek consuls to his large home, and the French consul joined them. With his sons and armed men, he went into the streets to gather up as many Christians as he could find to bring to safety in his walled compound.

He rescued 400 orphans, six priests, and 11 nuns. Franciscan priests and brothers who did not trust the Muslim would-be savior were burned alive in their building. In five days of rioting and murder, thousands of Christians were killed. The French consul said later that he believed Abd el-Kader had saved some 11,000 Christians.

This background is important for setting the stage for Kiser's narrative because Abd el-Kader's heroism in defense of Christians against Muslim mobs made him an international celebrity. French newspapers wrote, "While the Turkish authorities were inexplicitly lethargic . . . the emir's behavior was admirable. Day and night, he looked after the general safety of the population, giving clear proof of his devotion to humanity and self-sacrifice." Another wrote, "The emir Abd el-Kader has immortalized himself by the courageous protection he has given the Syrian Christians. One of the most beautiful pages of the history of the 19th century will be devoted to him." Another said, "When the carnage was at its worst, the emir appeared in the streets, as if sent by God." And The New York Times wrote, "Today, the Christian world unites to honor the dethroned Prince of Islam, the most unselfish of knightly warriors, risking limb and life to rescue his ancient foes, his conquerors and the conquerors of his race and religion, from outrage and from death . . . It is no light thing for history to record that the most uncompromising soldier of Mohammedan independence became the most intrepid guardian of Christian lives and . . . honor in the days of his political downfall and in the decline of his people. The defeats which surrendered Algiers to the Frank have been strangely and nobly avenged." Later, The New York Times wrote, "The nobility of his character, no less than the brilliancy of his exploits in the field, long ago won him the admiration of the world . . . If to be an ardent patriot, a soldier whose genius is unquestioned, whose honor is stainless; a statesman who could weld the tribes of Africa into a formidable enemy; a hero who could accept defeat and disaster without a murmur — if all this constitutes a great man, Abd-El-Kader deserves to be ranked among the foremost of the few great men of the century."

Commander of the Faithful is a rewarding read for many diverse tastes and interests. It describes the art of tribal coalition-building practiced by Abd el-Kader who emphasized the shared values and identity of Islam, much as the Prophet of Islam did in the 7th century Hijaz and the Grand Sanusi did in nearby Libya in the 19th century. It also required shrewd political bargaining and sometimes harsh punishment for leaders and tribes that broke their word. John Kiser's extensive research also provides detailed descriptions of battles between Abd el-Kader's troops and their French opponents — sometimes winning but toward the end mostly losing. There is fascinating information on the uses of horses, commercial trade, and agriculture as weapons of war — as well as decapitation.

When he went to France in voluntary exile, Abd el-Kader's reputation for courage, caring, and compassion spread far and wide in the country that had reneged on its promise to free him to go live in Mecca. Former French prisoners of war attested to his kindness, priests and bishops to his spirituality. Some of his admirers in Bordeaux raised enough signatures on a petition to get the Emir on the presidential ballot in 1848. In Britain, William Thackeray composed the poem "The Caged Hawk," a tribute to Abd el-Kader. Even public opinion in Britain came to favor the Emir as a noble underdog. In 1850, a 33 to one horse named Abd el-Kader won the Grand National, and won again in 1851. The British called the horse "Little Ab."

In November, 1852 the Emir was honored by the French War Minister and senior generals with a military display. Kiser writes, "Six regiments from the cream of the army he had tormented for fifteen years were going to pay their respects to a worthy adversary. Trumpets sounded, swords flashed, flags dipped that afternoon . . . as the emir, mounted on his new Arab charger, flanked by [Generals] Daumas and Magnan, observed thousands of brightly colored cuirassiers, lancers, carabiners, troops of the line and artillery units parade and maneuver for hours. That evening, War Minister Saint-Arnaud hosted a dinner in the emir's honor for eighty guests in the palace of Versailles" (p. 260).

Kiser's engaging prose and the story he tells cries out to be made into a major motion

picture. Ridley Scott could do it along the lines of his Kingdom of Heaven, portraying Saladin in combat with the Crusaders in Jerusalem.

But for this reader, the most important message of Commander of the Faithful is the ethical values that guided Abd el-Kader's life as a boy, a man, a nationalist and military leader, and a noteworthy exile. His father, Muhi al-Din, had educated his son in the ways of the Kadiriyya brotherhood, a Sufi order, named for Abd al-Kader al-Jilani, an 11th century holy man. Al-Jilani's message attracted not only Muslims but also Jews and Christians. He taught that Jesus should have a special place in the hearts of Muslims, as he has in the Qu'ran, because his power of love made him stand out among all the prophets. The master's mission was to do good works, save souls, and move humankind toward heaven. Al-Jilani put special emphasis on obedience, humility, and charity. On a trip to Damascus with his father, Abd el-Kader studied with Shaykh Khalid Naqshabandi, whose Sufi order had been founded in Central Asia in the 14th century. As Kiser puts it, "the sheik talked about the different methods of interpreting God's word and the hadiths [traditions of the Prophet], the different ways to read the texts and the different levels of understanding [and] the different forms of behavior that are also religious" (p. 30). The basis for the Emir's respect of other religions and also of his intellectual and moral counter-fundamentalism was being laid.

Kiser renders a conversation between Muhi al-Din and Abd el-Kader on a visit to Tunis where they met people of diverse languages and religions:

'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' (p. 27).

This finally is the story of The Commander of the Faithful. Abd el-Kader was a Muslim leader in the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, Jesus, Moses, and the prophets of the Abrahamic tradition — the Abrahamic family. He once wrote to the Bishop of Algiers, "All the religions brought by the prophets from Adam to Muhammad, rest upon two principles: the exaltation of God Most High, and compassion for His creatures." The rest, to borrow from Rabbi Hillel, is commentary.

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