

Commander of the Faithful: The Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader

John W. Kiser

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If a prospective reader had “seen the movie”—no, there isn’t one—or even heard someone talk about this book on TV, they might be likely to have a close look at it in a bookstore. But as things are, a book about a figure in Middle Eastern history, “about a jihadist” can’t be expected to arouse much interest in this country, except among the learned and the open-minded.

Which is too bad. It’s true that Abd el-Kader led a *jihad*, not a *crusade*; the latter, by definition Christian, is commonly regarded in the West as a thoroughly respectable undertaking, while the former, by definition Islamic, is at best open to question.

But Abd el-Kader stands at an extreme opposite to what a Westerner might expect of a “jihad” leader. The name he was given at birth by those who would groom him for manhood and leadership translates as “servant of the Almighty,” and Kiser rightly devotes more space than might ordinarily be considered necessary to his subject’s early life and education, by way of accounting for the qualities he would exhibit in manhood, winning widespread respect, both secular and non-secular.

So striking were his abilities and character that at the age of twenty-four he was called upon to lead a jihad against the French, who had invaded and occupied Algiers. The fifteen-year struggle that ensued would dramatically change the course of his life. France clearly was determined not to yield, and sought to demoralize Abd el-Kader by means of brutal retaliation against tribes that were supporting him. He responded by surrendering.

Later, exiled in Damascus when Turkish authorities undertook what amounted to a pogrom against some 10,000 Christians and diplomats, Abd el-Kader risked his life to protect them, facing down an angry mob that was overpowered by the force of his personality.

This is a strikingly good biography, and an important one as well. If John Kiser’s subject had been an American, he would be known to all of us; though it should be mentioned in this context that he was once so widely admired and lavishly honored that a town in Iowa adopted his name (www.elkader-iowa.com).

Although Kiser wrote this book for a general readership, it is the result of more than a decade of scholarly research and includes extensive chapter notes, assuring it of a place in specialized academic libraries as well. (August 18, 2009)

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