

Commander of the Faithful

reviewed by Jim Gant

It took many years of fighting, reading, thinking, and writing to inculcate in me that warfare is not primarily physical; it is not about places—it is about people. Warfare is political, psychological, and spiritual. Few books capture this maxim as powerfully as *Commander of the Faithful: The Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader* by John W. Kiser. *Commander of the Faithful* describes in fascinating detail the life and times of Abd el-Kader, one of the least known and yet influential Muslim leaders of the 19th century. Abd el-Kader was a Muslim scholar and guerrilla commander who led a war against the French occupation of Algiers. After battling the French for 17 years, Abd el-Kader ultimately surrendered under honorable conditions and was forced into exile by the French government. His life is a shining example of humanity in action. This book is an

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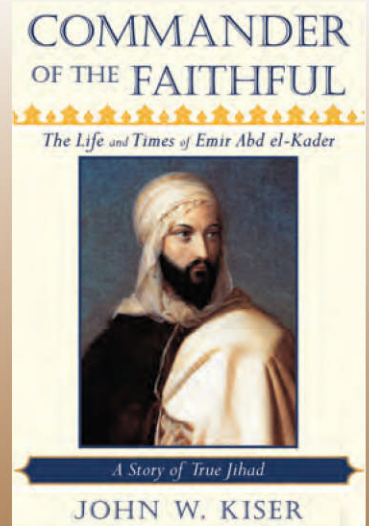
foreign allies, we must first build strong and meaningful relationships. *Commander of the Faithful* will give readers a powerful mental model for how to navigate the “human domain.”

Abd el-Kader’s life was one of great struggle and adversity. He was born in 1807 in Oran, Algiers, into a distinguished family of marabouts. Marabouts were holy men. Abd el-Kader’s father, Muhi al-Din, was also a leading tribal sheikh. His mother was responsible for his early education. She taught him how to read and write. She

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important read for anyone concerned with the future of warfare and foreign policy. The United States is trying to win wars and keep peace. This cannot be done with more intelligence and firepower. It can only be done with more *intelligent firepower*, which includes an understanding of the importance of culture and religion. As we seek to build capacity in our

taught him that, above all, a person “had to pray with their hearts, not just their lips.” His father took over Abd el-Kader’s instruction when the boy turned eight, waking his son up early each morning and teaching him the traditions of the prophet Mohammed. Abd el-Kader also studied the works of the greatest religious scholars of the time. He learned mathematics,



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geography, astronomy, philosophy, and history. He read Aristotle, Plato, and Ibn Kaldun, and he was taught that religion and knowledge were inseparable. By age 13, Abd el-Kader was a skilled horseman and drilled in the intricacies of desert survival. Abd el-Kader was soon sent away to a *zawiya*, a school run by Sufis, to learn oratory and to deepen his spiritual knowledge. Muhi al-Din had one more important lesson for his son. In 1825, Abd el-Kader and his father, along with many followers, started the long trek to Mecca. The trek would take almost three years and was both arduous and illuminating. In 1827, a year before Abd-el Kader’s return to Oran from Mecca, an argument between the ruler of Algiers, Dey Hussein, and the French consul occurred that would eventually spark a war between Algiers and France. The argument was over a payment due to two Jewish families in Algiers who had supported the French. The

French consul insulted Hussein, who then swatted the consul in the face with a fly fan. France's "honor" had been assailed—it had to be recovered.

In 1830, French warships came into view off the coast of Algiers, signaling the beginning of a 17-year war between Algiers and France. During the war, Abd el-Kader earned world renown as a guerrilla fighter, a tribal leader, an extraordinary relationship builder, and a man of enlightened spirituality.

As a guerrilla fighter and tribal leader, Abd el-Kader held down a vastly superior French force for almost two decades using classic guerrilla warfare tactics. At the same time, he held together the fragile and fractured tribes across Algiers. The ambush and the raid were his primary tactics: "No frontal assaults. Harass, then harass more. Cut their lines of supply and communication. Exhaust their soldiers. Let the sun and the heat do their work." At one point, his guerrilla forces tied down one-third of the French Army. Abd el-Kader was a passionate leader and motivator. He had the uncommon ability to stir the blood of his men when necessary and calm them when patience was needed. His ability to rebound from tactical and psychological set-backs became a point of respect for both his tribal allies and his enemy. His physical endurance was legendary. He could ride his horse for 36 hours, only stopping to pray. It was not just his battlefield savvy that set him apart from other great guerrilla leaders; it was also his political adaptiveness. He was not just trying to win a war—he was trying to forge a nation. Amidst the chaos of the war, his humanity shone through in a very direct way. He had insisted that French prisoners be treated humanely. After the war was over, some of his most ardent supporters were the men he had held as prisoners of war, an incredible testament to his character. "The only real glory is to treat well an honorable enemy," said Abd el-Kader. To this day, the International Committee of the Red Cross has a bust of Abd el Kader in its headquarters, where he was praised for his humanity and

his treatment of prisoners long before such practices were codified in the Geneva Conventions.

Abd el-Kader had many attributes that set him apart, but it was his innate and visceral ability to forge relationships that ultimately underpinned his successes. His ability to build strong and enduring relationships went well beyond that of his followers. Most striking was his aptness at building relationships with his enemy—an enemy who spoke a different language and had a completely different culture and faith. Time after time, he showed an uncommon understanding of the French that allowed him to be successful in combat, to arrange prisoner of war swaps, and to receive delegates from the French who wanted to discuss possible peace terms.

Throughout the book, it is evident that Abd el-Kader's deep spiritual convictions and his Islamic beliefs were the foundation of his character. In 1860, turmoil brewed in Damascus, resulting in thousands of Christians being murdered at the hands of the Druze, a religious order separate from either Christians or Muslims. Had it not been for Abd el-Kader and some of his men, thousands more would have been slaughtered. At great personal risk to himself and his entire family, he sheltered all the Christians he could find. His actions in Damascus clearly reflect something that only could have been done by a man of faith, of great moral courage and one who had a deep respect for Christians, "those of the book" as Christians were called. Abd el-Kader's deep spiritual beliefs can best be summarized in his own words written in a book titled *Spiritual Writings*:

If you think God is what different communities believe—the Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, polytheist and others—He is that, but also more. If you think and believe what the prophets, saints and angels profess—He is that, but He is still more. None of His creatures worship Him in His entirety. No one is an infidel in all the ways relating to God. No one knows all of God's facets. Each

of His creatures worships and knows Him in a certain way and is ignorant of Him in others.

Abd el-Kader was a spiritual scholar who had deep respect for all religions and truly wanted to be a bridge between Christians and Muslims.

After 17 years at war, fighting a foe who was vastly superior in manpower and resources, and only after suffering great losses with more surely to come, did Abd el-Kader determine that further resistance was futile. Speaking to his remaining followers, Abd el-Kader said,

If I thought there were still a possibility to defeat France, I would continue. Further resistance will only create vain suffering. We must accept the will of God, who has not given us victory, ...

He then surrendered to Gen Louis de Lamoriciere, his good friend and respected foe on the battlefield, with his word and honor intact. He was received with great respect and reverence by the French. Critics claim that if indeed the war was a *jihad*, then surrender under any circumstances was unacceptable—particularly to infidel invaders, who would pillage the land and the people. I cannot imagine a more difficult decision for a leader to make than that of surrendering, unless senseless slaughter was the only outcome.

Abd-el Kader, whose name means "servant of the Almighty," was a heroic man whom people of all cultures and religious faiths can look to, to discover a path of knowledge based on mutual respect and inclusiveness in dealing with one another. *Commander of the Faithful* is an important work that has broad implications for all of us. Abd el-Kader is a "hero for the ages" and a bright and shining light for Muslims and non-Muslims around the world to study and emulate. *Commander of the Faithful* comes with my highest recommendation. It is a must read for anyone involved in the business of building better relationships through understanding and tolerance.



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