

Emir Abd el-Kader: A Muslim Hero for Our Time



Introduction to an Interactive Curriculum

Developed by ING

Introduction

What is this curriculum about?

Designed for use by instructors in middle schools, high schools and colleges, this curriculum relates the life experiences and lessons of the 19th century Arab leader Emir Abd el-Kader. The curriculum is drawn from his life story as told in John W. Kiser's book, *Commander of the Faithful: the Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader*; references to the work are made throughout the curriculum. We highly recommend using the book as a reference when using this curriculum. The book is available on [Amazon](#).

The lessons mirror the book as it chronicles his life story, from his seminal experiences as a young man accompanying his father, to his role as a military leader against the French occupation of his homeland, to his exile in France and later Syria, where he became renowned in the West for his pivotal stance in protecting the lives of thousands of Christians. Eulogized simultaneously as the "George Washington of Algeria" and a defender and savior of Christians in Syria, his bigger-than-life figure and remarkable story makes for a great narrative and teaching moment. Many of the themes highlighted by his example are as relevant today as they were during his own life.

What is the curriculum composed of?

The curriculum is composed of five lesson plans accompanying a digital presentation titled *Emir Abd el-Kader: A Muslim Hero for our Time*. Each lesson includes questions about the topic as well as discussion questions on the larger themes addressed by the story. Every lesson also includes supplemental films and additional teacher resources. These lessons were designed to be used either jointly or independently as stand-alone curriculum depending on the time available and your desired focus; however we advise showing the entirety of the digital presentation for comprehension and understanding.

Why is it important to study the life of Emir Abd el-Kader?

Muslims and their religion are both misunderstood outside their faith and often misrepresented from within. Like Christianity, Islam has both multi-cultural and multi-sectarian dimensions, and yet that great diversity is rarely highlighted. Abd el-Kader's life story provides a glimpse into the diversity within the faith that both existed in Abd el-Kader's day (1808-1883), and continues today. This curriculum about the life and values of Abd el-Kader provides valuable, yet little known historical information about one of the greatest men of the 19th century. It also offers a portrait of what it means to be a pious and honorable Muslim and an exemplary human being who was admired from Iowa, London and Paris to Moscow and Mecca.

What is special about this particular book on Emir Abd el-Kader?

While there is a body of literature about the life of Emir Abd el-Kader, it is mostly in French. The earliest English work about Abd el-Kader was by a British army officer, Colonel Charles Henry Churchill in 1869, who was impressed by the exploits of the Emir while fighting against the French. Other English language biographies about the Emir include works by Raphael Danziger, Elsa Marston, and Ahmed Bouyardene.

As described by international education consultant Bonnie James in her comments on the occasion of the 4th annual Abd el-Kader essay prize awards in Elkader, Iowa May 5, 2012, "Commander of the Faithful is a very good story written in an engaging style—it is not an easy read but it is not beyond the ability of a solid student. It is also a book that is engaging in many disciplines It has geography, history, the social sciences, physiology, philosophy, religion, linguistics, and more. Commander of the Faithful offers many pathways of curriculum, offered in a rich context."

She also emphasizes three important issues for high school students that are brought out by this book:

- 1) Written from the perspective of a colonized people struggling for their freedom, the book provides a first person look at the historical impact of colonialism on various world cultures— and helps readers reflect on the continuing impact of economic colonialism today.
- 2) In contrast to the one-dimensional representations people often have, this book offers perspectives about culture and faith with their full and varied aspects and faces — both positive and negative—both for Muslims and Christians.
- 3) Like most good stories, the book underlines and intertwines the pivotal role of character and character development and the accompanying life decisions which both reflected and developed the Emir’s character.

What do reviewers say about the book?

“ . . . a strikingly good biography and an important one as well. . . . the result of more than a decade of scholarly research.” – *ForeWord Magazine*

“ . . . brings both the man and his world brilliantly to life.” – Steve Simon, Council on Foreign Relations

“ . . . notable for illustrating that the meeting of civilizations need not always produce a clash.” – *Kirkus Reviews*

“a valueable and timely reminder of a gifted man who is regarded by many as a philosopher-saint who balanced devout faith with openness to new ideas that rare figure: a bridge between East and West.”
– *Times Literary Supplement*

What is Islamic Networks Group and what is their mission?

Islamic Networks Group (ING) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to counter prejudice and discrimination against American Muslims by teaching about their traditions and contributions in the context of America’s history and cultural diversity. ING seeks to provide balanced information to educators that will help supplement their curriculum in a manner that is relevant, engaging and informative.

Curriculum Standards

This curriculum *Emir Abd el-Kader: A Muslim Hero for our Time* was designed to supplement content standards in social studies and world history classes in middle and high schools as it relates to the study of world religions and leaders. The five lessons focus on many themes addressed by the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies and the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA. Many of these themes are also addressed in state social studies content standards including the states of California, Texas, and New York, three leaders in this field.

This curriculum also helps students meet many of the Common Core State Standards, as enumerated separately in each lesson.

Relevant Themes

Concepts such as beliefs, values, mores, institutions, cohesion, diversity, accommodation, adaptation, assimilation, and dissonance – (National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies – 1: Culture)

Different interpretations of key historical periods and patterns of change within and across nations, cultures, and time periods – (National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies – 2: Time, Continuity, and Change)

That complex and varied interactions among individuals, groups, cultures and nations contribute to the dynamic nature of personal identity (National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies – 4: Individual Development and Identity)

Concepts such as: mores, norms, ritual, status, role, socialization, ethnocentrism, cultural diffusion, competition, cooperation, conflict, assimilation, race, ethnicity, and gender (National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies – 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions)

Concepts and ideals such as: human dignity, social justice, liberty, equality, inalienable rights, responsibilities, civil dissent, citizenship, majority and minority rights, the common good, and the rule of law (National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies – 10: Civic Ideals and Practices)

The origins of Islam and major beliefs (Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools–7.2; New York Content Standards–Global History and Geography 2.3a, 2.3b; Texas Education Agency Curriculum Standards–Social Studies–World History Studies–113.42.23.A)

The life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools–7.2.2)

The significance of the Qur’an (Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools–7.2.3)

The student understands the relationships among religion, philosophy, and culture (Texas Education Agency Curriculum Standards–Social Studies 6.19.A/ 113.43. World Geography Studies)

The development of Islamic law and its impact (New York Content Standards–Human and Physical Geography 2.3a, 2.3b; Texas Education Agency Curriculum Standards–Social Studies–World History Studies–113.42.25.D)

Position of “people of the book” (New York Content Standards–Human and Physical Geography–2.3a, 2.3b)

Islamic teachings on the connection with Judaism and Christianity (Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools–7.2)

Historical Role of Religion (Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools–12.3.3)

Lesson Topics

This curriculum *Emir Abd el-Kader: A Muslim Hero for Our Time* is divided into five distinct lesson plans with accompanying presentation notes and follow-up questions. Each lesson covers the topics outlined below which can be used alone or as part of the entire curriculum.

Lesson One: A Young Abd el-Kader

- Elkader, Iowa was named after the 19th century Arab leader.
- The location and history of Algeria is in North Africa which was at that time part of the Ottoman Empire.
- Abd el-Kader belonged to Bedouin culture with its concepts of tribal affiliations and hierarchy.
- He was born into a respected religious family of scholars and spiritual leaders known as *marabouts*.
- His upbringing and education included not only religious education, but horsemanship and hunting.
- A brief overview of Abd el-Kader’s religion, which laid a foundation for his beliefs and actions.
- Qur’anic teachings as well as prophetic sayings had an important impact on his life.

- Understanding the term “jihad” which means “righteous struggle” or “righteous exertion.”
- Abd el-Kader joins his father on a pilgrimage to Mecca which is suddenly interrupted when they are detained for two years by the local governor.
- After being freed, they continue their journey, meeting people of diverse religions and cultures.
- Stopping in Cairo they meet the governor of Egypt who warns them of events to come.
- In Syria and Iraq they meet with religious leaders and Abd el-Kader’s further enriches his education.

Lesson Two: Commander of the Faithful

- In 1830 the French attack and occupy the city of Algiers after a politically motivated pretext.
- When the French threaten Oran, Abd el-Kader speaks up against providing protection to the Bey of Oran; without the protection of Algerian tribes, Oran falls to the French.
- Abd el-Kader is chosen as leader against the French invasion and becomes known as “Commander of the Faithful.”
- This begins a war with France which lasted for fifteen years during which he exploits France’s uncertainty about its aims in North Africa.
- France’s ineffective tactics drag on the conflict, but after ten years, General Bugeaud began a “scorched earth” policy which turned the tides against Abd el-Kader.
- Abd el-Kader’s most powerful weapon was his humane treatment of prisoners and his willingness to free prisoners in a prisoner exchange.
- In 1843 Abd el-Kader is dealt a severe blow when his *smala* or “mobile tent city” is captured by the French, who even destroy his collection of thousands of books.
- In 1846 while Abd el-Kader was away, his lieutenants massacre French prisoners. This infamous incident tarnishes his reputation—which previously was one of chivalry, resilience and honorable conduct in battle—and follows him for many years to come.
- In 1847, he decides to voluntarily lay down arms out of concern for the toll the war was taking in innocent lives—a decision guided by his religious teachings. In opposition to his lieutenants, he negotiates a deal with French generals and agrees to surrender in exchange for a promise of exile in the Middle East.

Lesson Three: Captivity in France

- In 1847 Abd el-Kader departs Algeria to France with his family and followers.
- The French parliament is divided about the promise made to him with many angered by what they view as lenient treatment of a former enemy.
- Abd el-Kader and his party are first taken to Toulon where it became clear that they are not leaving.
- The French find themselves in a dilemma over the promise to let him travel to the Middle East; if they fail to keep their promise they will be shamed by other powers, yet public opinion was firmly against freeing him.
- King Louis-Philippe wanted to honor the pledge, but was forced to abdicate due to riots before he could act. Yet the Emir responds to this disappointment with equanimity and a resolve to keep up his spirits and those of his followers.

- Abd el-Kader and his entourage are then moved to Pau where they are initially greeted with hostility by the townspeople; others, impressed by his intelligence and serenity in the face of adversity form a cult of sorts around him.
- When political turmoil once again grips France during the riots of 1848, he realizes that the government has greater concerns than his fate.
- After six months in Pau he is moved once again to Château d'Amboise near Paris, which although more spacious and comfortable had greater restrictions on visitors and his movements.
- Once again his hopes were dashed by the failure of the war minister Lamoricière to honor the promise he had made Abd el-Kader when he was a general.
- Despite his captivity, Abd el-Kader made efforts to build bridges with the French whom he had come know and understand better through his meetings with both notable and regular Frenchmen.
- Yet captivity takes a heavy toll on his party with 25 deaths, including some of his own children.
- Finally, after five years of captivity he is freed by now Emperor Louis-Napoleon, a man whom he comes to regard with a mutual respect and appreciation.

Lesson Four: Living His Faith

- After traveling first to Turkey, Abd el-Kader finally settled in Damascus, coincidentally taking up residence in the home of his spiritual master, Ibn Arabi. Not since Saladdin had a visitor received such a warm welcome.
- While still in France the Emir had written a manuscript in which he explains his views about religion and the relations between different philosophies and faiths. He was soon to put his own faith into action.
- The backdrop of the incident is animosity between the Druze and Maronite Christians of Lebanon which spreads to Damascus. Fueling the conflict is a set of reforms imposed by European powers on the Ottoman Empire at the conclusion of the Crimean War in 1856; among the reforms was an exemption for Christians from paying a poll tax. When some Christians stop paying it, Ottoman officials vow to teach them a lesson.
- In the spring of 1860 Abd el-Kader hears rumors of religious violence against the Christians of Damascus and tries to warn the governor as well as Druze and Muslim religious leaders to no avail. In July, 1860 a mob begins attacking the Christian quarter of Damascus.
- Abd el-Kader risks his own life to save thousands of Christians, rushing with his two sons to bring them to safety. He stands up to an angry mob which was demanding that he turn over the Christians; he refuses and instead chastises them for their ignorance of Islamic law which requires the protection of innocents.
- He continues to search the streets for Christians, taking them to the citadel where they are protected by Algerians. He explains that his actions were merely a reflection of his religious teachings and humanitarian concern for innocent lives.
- When his actions become known in Europe and beyond, he receives recognition from across the world, including the medal of the French Legion of Honor.
- His new fame opens the door to him playing a role in the building of the Suez Canal, which he views as more than just a physical connections between the East and West.
- Abd el-Kader continued his role of connecting the East and West, believing that all people and faiths share commonalities that can unify them.
- He died quietly in 1883 with the same dignity with which he lived.

Lesson Five: Abd el-Kader's Legacy

- Impressed by Abd el-Kader's resistance against the French, an American lawyer named Timothy Davis named a small town in Iowa in his honor, making it one of a handful of American towns with Arabic names.
- Abd el-Kader was also honored for his actions in Damascus by notable world leaders such as Queen Victoria, Pope Pius IX, and Sir Richard Burton. The New York Times published a glowing tribute to him.
- Today there is much that we can learn from Abd el-Kader's life and legacy, including his interest and willingness to learn from and about other people and cultures.
- Abd el-Kader's humane treatment of prisoners was one of the sources of historical support and inspiration for Geneva Conventions which govern the treatment of prisoners.
- He was also devoted to building bridges between faiths and people, and most importantly, was willing to defend those of other faiths when his religious beliefs so dictated.
- His life example and actions provide us with powerful lessons for today, including a live example of humanity, tolerance towards other faiths, and living up to his convictions.