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When a Muslim becomes the Savior of Christians: Emir Abd el-Kader's Humanist Values of Islam in the Damascus Massacre (1860)

البعد الإسلامي للقيم الإنسانية للأمير عبد القادر في فتنة دمشق الطائفية

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to revive the legacy of Emir Abdel Kader as he incarnates Islam in its most Mohammedan form. Abd el Kader's position in the Damascus Massacre (1860) might be a very interesting lesson to the world and to Muslims, in particular. His nobility and sense of universal humanity incited him to protect Christians against pseudo-Muslims in the bloody conflict of this Massacre. The question that is at the heart of this paper is: How can Abd el-Kader's understanding of Islam correct modern-day denatured Islam? Throughout the religious discussion of his experience in the Damascus massacre, this paper aims at a universal human lesson of tolerance and fundamental fairness. Throughout the examination of Abd el-Kader's position in the fight between the Druzes and the Maronites, the researcher concludes that Abd el-Kader's protection of innocent Christians against Muslim aggressors might foster a new interfaith debate of tolerance and fairness.

Keywords: Christians; Damascus Massacre; Jihad; Emir Abd el-Kader; Humanism; Islam

الملخص

يسعى هذا المقال إلى إحياء تراث الأمير عبد القادر و قيمه الإنسانية الإسلامية عبر مساره الثوري. لعل أهم خصال الأمير الإنسانية تتجسد في موقفه في فتنة دمشق الطائفية (1860). مستمدا سلوكه الإنساني من أصول دينه ، سعى الأمير جاهدا في حماية المسيحيين ضد المسلمين المعتدين في محنة الشام الطائفية و ذلك يتماشى مع القيم المحمدية و خاصة مع مبدأ أهل الذمة الذي أوصى به الرسول الكريم. انتهت أزمة الشام الطائفية بفضل جهود الأمير عبد القادر التي يمكن الاستدلال بها لخلق حوار جديد بين الأديان مبني على التسامح و التعايش وجهاد النفس.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المسيحيين، فتنة دمشق الطائفية، الأمير عبد القادر، الإسلام، الإنسانية، الجهاد

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious wars and interfaith conflicts and animosity are not new in the history of the world. Moreover, in a world politically circumscribed by the 9/11 events, Islam has become the religion that is more subject to negative criticism due to notions of jihad, polygamy and hijab. Although Islam gave birth to scholars that continue to impact the world and our daily lives such as Averroes

or Avicenna to name but these, the role of Islam in enlightening the world, both scientifically and humanistically, has dramatically decreased in the lapse of the last two centuries.

Notions of tolerance and justice are fundamental to building a society of values. To enforce these fundamentals in multi-ethnic, multi-cultural; let alone, multi-religious societies is a hard nut to crack.

What is more, interfaith dialogue has become almost impossible in a world dominated by mass media that reduces explanations and discussions of complex issues to catchy sound bites. Islam, in particular, is the religion that is currently less likely to be involved in interfaith dialogues due to the profaned issue of Jihad.

This paper seeks to shed light Emir Abd el-Kader's attitude towards Christians in the Damascus massacre (1860). It also seeks to highlight his position in this conflict as a worldly lesson of justice and tolerance. His fair treatment of Christians and rightful disgrace of the Druzes is a lesson imbued with valuable ethics in Islam. Abd el Kader's understanding and practice of Jihad must be revived and discussed, since it might represent the most correct meaning of true Islamic jihad at the level of self. Therefore, this paper aims at highlighting Emir Abd el-Kader's humanitarian and fair attitude towards the Maronites in the Damascus massacre and seeks to derive a moral lesson that would advance interfaith dialogue in the contemporary age.

2. Surrender to the French or Surrender to God?

It bears stressing that Abd el-Kader's wisdom was highly admired by world leaders who were still locked in a desperate grapple with their culturally irreconcilable citizens. One good instance of such leaders is American president Abraham Lincoln who could not reconcile the South with the North during the Civil War (1861-1865) and had ultimately emancipated the Blacks to save the American union. Emir Abd el-Kader's protection of thousands of Christians in the Turkish-inspired pogrom during the Damascus massacre (1860) won him the admiration of Abraham Lincoln,

Queen Victoria, Pope Pius IX, French Generals, Poets, and English nobility. Upon his death in 1883, the New York Times mourned him as follows, "the nobility of his character won him the admiration of the world ... He was one of the few great men of the century."

John Kiser, an aficionado of Emir Abd el-Kader, solicited students at Elkader's Central Community High School to participate in an annual essay contest in 2009 emphasizing the timeless relevance of Abd el-Kader. Student Rebecca Roberts was the runner-up with her essay entitled "Commander of the Faithful" in line with Kiser's full length book on Abd el-Kader's combat in his *Commander of the Faithful: The Life and Times of Emir Abd el-Kader A Story of True Jihad (1808-1883)*. In 2008, John Kiser has started the Abd el-Kader Education project (AEP) to revive his memory. On Kiser's webpage, the objectives of the project are clarified and the probable question of why to revive the memory of Emir Abd el-Kader is answered. It is noted, "as a pious and deeply conservative Muslim, his [Abd el-Kader] life of 'true jihad' can inspire Muslims in the US and around the World to think differently about the meaning of jihad."¹

(available from <https://www.johnwkiser.com/abd-el-kader-project.php>). To this I would add that Abd el-Kader was a living exegesis of the Quranic verses on jihad mainly through his position in religious conflicts.

One significant question that should be addressed before moving to the Damascus riots of 1860, is why did Abd el-Kader surrender to the French authorities in 1847? Although this question might seem at odds with the main purpose of this paper, the answer to this question will pave the way for

the discussion of Emir Abd el-Kader's humanistic values and true understanding of Islam. On August 19, 1841, at the prestigious Kairouan center of Islamic learning in Tunis the subject of jihad was discussed at length in light of the Quran's teachings and those of its greatest commentators. A contentious debate finally produced a fatwa (considered opinion). It declared:

"When Muslims whose territory has been invaded by infidels have fought so long as there was hope of driving them out of the country, and when it is certain that continued struggle will only lead to the ruin of Muslims without any chance of defeating the conquerors, and while preserving the hope of their yoke being removed with the help of God, they may live under the domination of infidels on the condition that they are allowed to freely exercise their religion, and their women and daughters will be respected."²

Exhausted after fifteen years of sacrifice and suffering in the face of superior French military power, Abd el Kader persuaded his die-hard lieutenants to lay down their arms in what had become a futile armed resistance. Abd el-Kader elucidated his position when he stated,

"Believe me, the fight is over. We must lay down our guns. God is our witness that we have fought as long and as hard as we could – so long as there was hope of liberating our country. But most of the tribes have quit the struggle. My own brothers have submitted to Lamoriciere. Now Muslims are killing Muslims. The sultan had imprisoned our brother in arms, Bou Hamidi, massacred the Beni Armer and sold their wives into slavery. The French

kept their word after Ben Salem submitted. I would rather put my trust in those whom we have fought against than those who have betrayed us. 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 judgment of God who has not given us victory and who in his infinite wisdom now wants this land to belong to Christians. Are we going to oppose His will?"³

Abd el-Kader's decision is in perfect accordance with the fatwa issued in Kairouan in 1841, that insists that if a given struggle leads to the ruin of Muslims, and that there is no chance of defeating the conqueror, the conquered should accept living under the domination of "infidels". Eventually, Abd el-Kader's surrender is justified by two ethical reasons through the following claims: "Muslims are killing Muslims," and "my brothers have submitted to Lamoriciere". Therefore, as there was no hope in ever winning the struggle and that Muslims were killing Muslims, the most ethical and wise solution harnessed to Divine Law ever was to surrender and "accept God's will". The issue of Emir Abd el-Kader's surrender is relevant to the discussion of his attitude in the Damascus Massacre. In both situations, one expects Abd el-Kader to react contrariwise to the way he eventually reacted. The brave Abd el-Kader is not expected to surrender to the French and yet he did, and the reason is his humanitarianism. The Muslim Abd el-Kader is not expected to fight Muslims in order to save Christians, and yet he did, and the reason once and again is the same: his humanism. Abd el-Kader pursued his goals as long as they did not contradict his humanist values, and once they did, he immediately let his goals down.

3. Abd el-Kader's Mohammedan Values in the Damascus Massacre

One particular witness of the Massacre was a French doctor, who after having been escorted to Abd el-Kader's house among the three hundred refugees at the Greek Consulate, recollected, "In those indescribable moments of anguish, heaven, however, sent us a savior! Abd el-Kader appeared surrounded by his Algerians, around forty of them. He was on horseback and without arms, his handsome figure calm and imposing."⁴

The Damascus massacre was precipitated when on July 8th, 1860 some Muslim boys had drawn images of crosses and the miters on the pavement of Straight Street bordering the Christian quarter of Damascus, only to spit and then throw garbage on the drawings. "For publically insulting Christianity Ahmad Pasha chose a diabolical punishment one that would provide evidence to the watchful Europeans of the respect demanded of Muslims for their Christian brothers, as required by the reforms, yet certain to arouse the rage of Muslims already indignant over European interference in their affairs."⁵

The massacre was described by Emir Abd el-Kader in the following letter that he addressed to the managers of the silk works at Krey on July 18th,

"Dear and honored Friends, -- I greatly desire to see you, and pray Allah to preserve you. I have received your honored letter, dated July 13, inquiring what happened to the Christians at Damascus. In answer, you are informed that on Monday, July 9, at

about 2 in the afternoon, the war broke out, in consequence of a punishment inflicted upon a few Mussulmans who had insulted the Christians. These Mussulmans, in a state of frenzy, rushed, armed to the teeth, to the Christian quarter, and began salying, burning and pillaging at the same time. The Turkish soldiers came to assist them, under the pretence of putting an end to the disturbance, but making common cause with the rioters, and killing, robbing, and plundering with them. A few old Mussulmans made efforts to stop the business, but the Turkish officers had no wish for peace, and, on the contrary, hounded on their soldiers against the unfortunate Christians, the soldiers being aided by hordes of plunderers belonging to every sect. Seeing matters were so desperate, I lost no time in taking under my protection these unfortunate Christians. I sallied forth, taking my Algerines with me, and we were able to save the lives of men, women and children, and bring them home with us. This state of things lasted Monday and Tuesday, during which the rioters did not cease to kill, burn and immolate the Christians, without the Governor affording them any help. I sent for M. LANUSSE, the French Consul, and other Frenchmen, to protect them from the fury of the mob. On the Wednesday, under the pretence of two Mussulmans having been found murdered, which was not the case, the war recommenced. Yet Damascus has a Governor; but it is the same thing as if it had not one. For me, I deplore the disaster which has befallen the Christians. The places where their houses stood cannot be recognized; all their dwellings are reduced to ashes. The number killed is not yet known, but it is estimated at 3,300. All the Europeans and Christians I have collected

are in safety in my house. I provide them with all they want, and pray Allah to save the unfortunate Christians from those fanatics. ABD-EL-KADER-BEN MAHI-EDDIN.”⁶

When a Druze mob asked Abd el-Kader to hand over the Christians under his protection, the Emir reminded him of the Quranic verse that condemns the killing of innocents. When describing this episode, Kiser clearly draws the link between Abd el-Kader’s Islam and his humanitarian values: “It is not hard to imagine the emir using on the Druze the same weapons he would use soon again at his own portals: his superior knowledge of Divine Law and of the entrance requirements to Paradise”⁷. Abd el-Kader’s Jihad in these riots took another form. He sought to fight the unislamic practices observed by pseudo-Muslims. It is recounted that Abd el-Kader sent various letters to the Ulema in Damascus soliciting their help and reminding them of their religious duty to protect religious minorities. However, these turned deaf ears to Abd el-Kader request. Hopeless, the emir then called on the mufti of Damascus “to persuade him in the name of their faith to carry out his obligations to protect the Christians. “He is sleeping and can’t be disturbed,” the emir was told.”⁸

Moreover, Kiser recounts Churchill’s narration of the dialogue between Emir Abd el-kader and the Druzes in a way that reminds us of the story of Moses. In chapter 28 of Quran entitled “Narration” it is narrated that Moses was in the city when he came upon two men fighting, one was an Israelite and the other an Egyptian. When the Israelite cried out for help Moses came to his rescue unwillingly killing the Egyptian. Repentant Moses said “My Lord!

Verily, I have wronged myself, so forgive me.” Thankful for God’s forgiving, Moses promises “My Lord! For that with which You have favoured me, I will never more be a helper for the criminals, disobedient to God, polytheists, sinners.”⁹ however, the following morning, the same Israelite calls Moses for help a second time as he was quarrelling with another Egyptian. Moses said “you are certainly a misguided man.” Moses’ fairness and his pronounced judgment of his kinsman as a troublemaker parallels Abd el-Kader’s equitable defense of Christian innocents in the Damascus massacre. Moses’ reply to the Israelite equals Abd el-Kader’s reply to the Druze asking him to turn over the Christians, “My brothers, your behavior violates the law of God. What makes you think you have a right to go around killing innocent people? Have you sunk so low that you are slaughtering women and children? Didn’t God say in our holy book, *whoever kills a man who has never committed murder or created disorder in the land will be regarded as a murderer of all humanity?*” Unwilling to listen to further advice another Druze shouted “you have killed Christians yourself” and this brings us back to Moses who had been reminded by his dreadful kinsman that he had killed a wretch the day before. To the Druze’s remark the Emir answered, “you are fools, the invaders I have killed were invaders and occupiers who were ravaging our country” after a long and vain dialogue Abd el-Kader claimed ‘as long as one of my soldiers is still standing, you cannot touch them. They are my guests. Murderers of women and children, you sons of sin, try to take one of these Christians and you will learn how well my soldiers fight.” In this statement, the Emir insists that he would not fight if his guests were not in danger. This

corresponds to the Quranic law of jihad indicating that jihad is only justifiable and legitimate in cases of self-defense.

The Emir's two opposed positions towards Christians i.e, the fighter of Christians in Algeria and the savior of Christians in Damascus, can only be further evidence of Abd el-Kader's nobility and just cause. Although Abd el-Kader's stance in both events was not motivated by religious difference, it was justified by religious sentiment and duty, namely humanitarianism and patriotism. In his struggle to protect Christians against the Muslim aggressors, Emir Abd el-Kader conforms to the Mohammedan principle of *Dhimma* that was revived through the reforms of *Hatti Humayun* of 1856¹⁰, also known as *Islâhât Firmani*. The latter caused a significantly heated debate among the Muslim community that regarded the treaty as a violation to their "sacred national rights" that "their ancestors gained with their blood,"¹¹ to use the words of Ahmad Pasha, the then governor of Damascus. The Ottoman administration was busy with the political dimension of the reforms since "the firman would risk the integrity of the Empire and its annexation to the Treaty would give way to foreign intervention and cause the dismemberment of the Empire."¹²

On the opposite side, Emir Abd el-Kader was preoccupied with the significant problem of co-existence. Dismayed that the events rapidly turned into a religious schism between Muslims and Christians, Abd el-Kader "went several times to see Ahmad Pasha, arguing that an attack on Christians would not only be cowardly but against the laws of Islam and humanity."¹³ It becomes clear at this point in Abd el-Kader's life that the simplistic meaning of jihad had taken a

new dimension that deviated from the politically known military jihad to the spiritually Akbarian Sufi practice of *jihâd al-nafs*. During the events of 1860, Abd el-Kader manifested his disapproval of the Ottoman administration's non-Islamic stance and solemnly declared war on the Druzes and their advocates when he stated, "I will go and put myself with the cavalry in the midst of the Christian quarter, and there I will fight as long as I have breath. I will die, if necessary, for the honor of Islam, whose law forbids crimes of this nature."¹⁴ Therefore, Abd el-Kader saw the good war as the *jihâd al-nafs*, a spiritual struggle "to achieve true mastery over the baser self, the primary site of contest for the Sufi"¹⁵. His national struggle in Algeria became overshadowed by his individual inner struggle. Therefore, as both social practice and doctrine, jihad has to be put in its appropriate context to be properly understood.

Abd el-Kader's position in the Damascus massacre reveals his enthusiasm to restore and strengthen Islam in the hearts of its believers. Worth mentioning at this point of is that Abd el-Kader spent the last twenty seven years of his life in Damascus, and it is during this period that "he articulated a decidedly critical view of armed struggle in determining the place of Jihad among Islamic practices."¹⁶ Abd el-Kader's sufi view of jihad is best expressed in chapter 73 of his *Kitâb Al Mawâqif* dedicated to the question of jihad. Abd el-Kader starts this chapter with the prophet's saying "Nous avons quitté le combat mineur pour le combat majeur."¹⁷ Abd el-Kader marks a keen distinction between the two forms of jihad while giving more valor to the *combat majeur* whose meaning Abd el-Kader

derives from the Prophetic tradition when he explains, "... et par "combat majeur" le combat contre l'âme, au moyen de la purification, de l'élimination des défauts, et l'embellissement des qualités."¹⁸

Therefore, Abd el-Kader's brave and humanitarian protection of the Christian Maronites against the Muslim Druzes emanates not for his earlier notion of jihad but is the quintessence of his Sufi maturation that might be epitomized in his saying "God has Stolen my [illusory] I from me and has brought me near to my [real] "I" ... The voyage has reached its end and everything other than Him ceased to exist."¹⁹ all in all, Abd el-Kader's life in Damascus might be a good international charter to solve religious struggles all over the world.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper sought to shed light on Abd el-Kader's Mohammedan qualities as he approached the Damascus massacre between the Maronites and the Druzes. Although, the Ottoman administration seemed to downplay the tragedy, Abd el-Kader could not accept the non-Islamic violation of the Christians' rights in the Damascus. The first section briefly discusses the causes behind Abd el-Kader's surrender to the French that proved, after investigation, to be surrender to God's will, to use Abd el-Kader's words. This "surrender to God's will" paved the way for Abd el-Kader to thoroughly surrender his soul to the Creator as he devoted the rest of his life in Damascus fighting the enemies of God's creation. Abd el-Kader pointed, in this regard, "all the religions of the Book rest on two principles – to praise God and to have compassion for his creatures"²⁰ The Damascus Massacre (1860) is a crucial

episode in his spiritual metamorphosis. The greatest lesson one could learn from the life of Emir Abd El Kader is that the truth that everyone should be concerned about is the truth of the self. Abd el-Kader's several fights led to his maturation as an advocate for universal peace.

In an attempt to draw lessons from the civil war conflicts in Lebanon and Damascus (1860), Leila Fawaz claims that "it is this [the civil war of 1860] that ushered in a lengthy phase of dialogue and coexistence in the history of Syria and Mount Lebanon"²¹ It is true that the ending of the Damascus Massacre was fundamentally due to Abd el-Kader's wisdom and his implementation of the Prophet's combat majeur. Following the Mohammedan tradition, he enlivened the principle of Dhimma without using his humanitarian service to proselytize the religion he observes. Therefore, Abd el-Kader's life is a collection of moral lessons that would do good service to Islam in the post 9/11 Islamophobic world.

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 8. Ibid., p. 297.
 9. Quran 28:15-17
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