

Abd el-Kader Conference

Lyon, France

December 12 – 14, 2013



Report on Lyon Abd el-Kader Conference

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So... who is this person and why am I in Lyon? He is the Algerian Emir Abd el-Kader who lived in the 19th century. He led the Algerian resistance against French colonization. In the late 1850's his resistance, remarkably successful for many years (and cheered on by other European countries and the United States—due to anti-French sentiment), ultimately failed. Rather than sacrifice more Algerian lives, he surrendered to the French.

He was taken prisoner and deported to France, to prevent him from being a rallying point for Algerian independence. He handled his imprisonment with dignity and soon became an international statesman. Everyone from the Pope Pius IX to President Lincoln sang his praises as a humanitarian and a force for good. From France he was allowed to relocate in Damascus, Syria. There he personally intervened and, at some risk to himself and his family, sheltered a thousand Christians from mob violence incited against them in the streets of Damascus by the Ottomans.

Abd el-Kader faded into history. Outside of Algeria, and some parts of France he has been relatively unknown. However, the recent (2008) book by American author John Kiser *Commander of the Faithful: the Life and Times of Abd el-Kader* has helped to reintroduce this forgotten Muslim leader of the 19th century to contemporary Muslims and others. His great humanitarian spirit, as well as his respect for all religion and religious persons, provides a sorely needed model for East-West respect and understanding.

Here in Lyon, the young French Algerian radio personality, Fouad Chergui, has organized a youth movement around the life and example of el-Kader. Below is a picture of Fouad speaking in the Hotel de Ville (City Hall) of Villeurbanne, a municipality in the district of Lyon, on Thursday evening, December 12.

Fouad founded the CLAP association for young Muslims in Lyon. CLAP is the initial letters for Connexions Locales d'Actions Plurielles/Location Connections for Diverse Activities. You can read about it at <http://www.clap-asso.fr/>



We met with the mayor of Villeurbanne and about 100 guests to initiate these three days of the third annual El-Kader Celebration in Lyon, advertised in Lyon as *Les journées de l'Emir et Des Quartiers Populaires/The Travels of the Emir and the Ghettos*.

Here are some of the very impressive students, who are mostly in University. In this group the three women are of French-Algerian Muslim families, and the young man (a Christian) is from Cameroon.



Here's a picture of them with Cathy Garms. Cathy and her husband Keith were here as well. They come from the little town of Elkader, Iowa. Believe it or not the town was named after the Emir, showing the extent of his fame and popularity in 19th century America. Cathy works as a volunteer building up the relationship of her town with other French and Algerian el-Kader associations. The additional woman on the right is from East Africa, Ethiopia I think.



On Friday morning about seven of us went to visit the National University of the Police (École nationale supérieure de la police) just north of Lyon in the hill town of Saint-Cyr-au-Mont-d'Or. It was an interesting group. We went because Daisy Kahn of New York was with us. Daisy, an immigrant Indian Muslim, works with the NYPD as a consultant to help the police deal with Muslim communities all over New York, and to help the Muslim communities understand the work of the police. Daisy's husband is the Iman of the mosque closest to the twin towers. The police leader we met with seems interested in inviting her back to do some work with the police of Lyon. We discussed the significant differences between the structure and organization of policing in France and in the US.

In the next photo Daisy is in the middle, with (left to right) Fouad, Kathy Garms, John Kiser, and the police representative Jean Marie Fiquet. We also met with an American liaison with Interpol, from the NYPD. The international organization of Interpol is based in Lyon.



On Friday evening we went to the Youth Center (also the site of Fouad’s Radio Station) that Fouad has established for university and high school students who live in the *Quartiers* (similar to “neighborhood”) that are populated largely by French-Algerians and immigrants from Algeria, Tunisia and other parts of Africa. His goal is to education young Muslim immigrant people in France, especially in the Lyon area, to responsible citizenship and humanitarianism, using the life and example of el-Kader.

John Kiser has been very supportive of this project. John asked me to participate this year to show local leaders here, both in the city administration and in the greater Lyon community, that we as American educators, understand and support what Fouad is doing. There are very aggressive secularists in French culture, and in the government, who are suspicious of any use of religiously-related topics outside of a specifically religious organization or community. So Fouad gets little support and some resistance because of his use of el-Kader and even because of his work with explicitly Muslim youth and young adults.

Also with us on Friday evening were an elderly Algerian man and woman, Mr. and Mrs. Mohamed Boutaleb, who are both direct descendants of El-Kader. Mohamed founded the *Foundation Emir Abdelkader* and continues as its president. However, he is somewhat infirm, so his daughter Zohour runs the organization which enjoys some prominence in Algiers. Zohour’s former husband was the Algerian Ambassador to the US and then to the UN.

Here is a photo of Mohamed at the opening ceremony on Thursday night at the City Hall. He is a highly respected advisor to the Algerian government.



Two Egyptian gentlemen, were also with us. Dr. Ahmed Moustafa is an artist and a university lecturer in London. The other man, Omar (I forget his last name) lives in Cairo and in London. He is originally Syrian, and the grandson of the last Syrian king. As a teenager he and his family had to flee Syria as the military took over and eventually installed the first Assad regime. (Assad's son is the current dictator.) It was very interesting to get the perspective of all these people on world events. The international representation was rounded off by the presence of an Islamic Law scholar from Pakistan. This gentleman translated *Commander of the Faithful* into Urdu.

On Saturday morning I visited the Grand Mosque of Lyon with Mohamed Boutaleb and his wife. It was a bit strange, because of some confusion about transportation. I was the only one to go on this visit. We met with the Iman of the Grand Mosque in his study for about an hour, drank coffee and discussed issue of being Muslim and running a mosque in France. Or, rather they discussed and I listened. They would switch back and forth from French to Arabic, as Algerians do. I was able to get some of the French. But they were all very hospitable. They showed me around the mosque. There were kids around for Saturday Arabic school. Here's the website of the Mosque: <http://www.mosquee-lyon.org/>

Saturday afternoon there was a panel discussion at the Jean Moulin University of Languages and Literature in Lyon. I started off with a 15 minute talk in French (Alors!) about the importance and the dynamics of interfaith (available at www.merrimack.edu/jcm). I was followed by a Catholic Priest of the Lyon Diocese Christian Délorme who has done a lot of work on interfaith and civil rights, including the right to work, among the Muslim communities in France. You can learn more about him at http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Delorme. Unemployment is a big problem among the immigrant communities, as well as among the wider population of young

adults in France and Europe. Then Daisy Kahn, John Kiser, and the Islamic scholar from Pakistan who translated John's book into Urdu gave little presentations. The students also spoke.

Saturday evening the three-day conference ended with a celebratory support at the CLAP center (Youth Center and Radio Station). Here are some photos. It's been a great experience of the opportunities and problems among young adults from immigrant Muslim backgrounds in France today.



The JCM Center will continue to nurture a relationship with the Abd el-Kader Education Project, based in Iowa and Lyon as a dimension of the Christian-Muslim dyad of its interfaith work.

