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CHAPTER 1

The Last Breath

La ilaha illa 'Llah
"There is no god but God. . ."

"Damascus, May 26, 1883.

"To His Excellency Jules Grévy, President of the Republic.

"With sorrow, I have the honor of conveying the great misfortune that has struck us regarding my father's person . . . who died this Saturday evening at midnight" (*Le Figaro*, May 28, 1883). It is in these laconic terms that Muhammad Sa'id announced the death of the Emir Abd el-Kader to the French President Jules Grévy.

During the first days of the spring of 1883, his state of health had dangerously worsened. "An illness of the heart," *Le Figaro* specified, "which, for several years, had slowly used up his strength and held his entourage in incessant fear of an approaching end" (*Le Figaro*, May 28, 1883). His entire life had prepared him to "give up his soul." Far from dreading this moment, it was with a feeling of fulfillment that he prepared to welcome it, "rejoicing," he wrote to one of his sons, "in going to meet the Almighty."[1] The Sufi Abd el-Kader had made of his existence a place of discovery of the inexpressible. A spiritual way which had led him to die to the world a little more each day, until the physical death which placed him at the threshold of what he designated as the "greatest deliverance and the highest bliss."[2] He dedicated the breaths that separated him from this decisive moment to the mention of the supreme Name *Allah*. . . . The last breath took place at midnight, Friday, May 25, 1883, at Doummar, in the outskirts west of Damascus.

1 Cited in Marie d'Aire (née Boissonnet), *Abd-el-Kader. Quelques documents nouveaux, lus et approuvés par l'officier en mission auprès l'émir* (Amiens: Impr. de Yvert et Tellier, 1900), p. 247.

2 *Mawqif* 320. *Kitab al-Mawaqif* (pl. of *mawqif*), or *The Book of Halts*, is the spiritual compendium of Abd el-Kader. We refer to the translations of Michel Chodkiewicz (Abd el-Kader, *Écrits spirituels* [Paris: Seuil, 1982]) and of A. Khurshîd (Lyon: Alif édition, 1996). The references are given as follows without further specification: *Mawqif* followed by a number.

At the first light of day, the inert body of the son of Sidi Muhyi ad-Din and Lalla Zuhra was placed in a bus going towards the old city. There, where formerly the deceased regularly met with his "brethren in God," the remains were left in the care of the religious dignitaries who undertook the funeral washing. Among them was one of his closest companions, the Shaykh[3] ʿAbd ar-Rahman ʿIllaysh, "his equal in sanctity,"[4] his son pointed out. Outside, the crowd had not ceased to grow as the news of his death spread. After receiving military honors in the presence of the city authorities and representatives of the consulate, the casket was conveyed in a funeral procession to the Grand Umayyad Mosque where an initial ceremony was celebrated. The convoy, followed by a compact throng of 60,000 persons, then headed north towards Salahieh, at the foot of Mount Qasiyun, the mountain of the Forty Saints.[5] He was buried in the mausoleum of the famous Sufi of Andalusia of the 13th century, Shaykh Ibn ʿArabi. The burial was done on orders of the Ottoman sultan, at the request of the governor of Damascus, Izzet Pasha. He thus shared the final resting place of him whom he considered to be one of his spiritual masters, and of whom he was the most eminent disciple of the 19th century—a divine favor, to which was added the one which the Andalusian considered to be the greatest: to be buried by men extinguished from themselves, of whom God is "the ear, the eye, and the tongue."[6]

Many men of letters paid a last tribute to the "Knight of the Faith," expressing mixed joy and sorrow in their soaring lyrics: "if for us thy departing tastes of Hell, Paradise is honored at thy coming,"[7] a poet wrote. And another, more somber one: "I see the universe darkened; the days without sun, the nights without moon. . . . Whilst the birds

3 The principal Arab terms are defined in a glossary at the end of the book.

4 Al-Hachemi, cited in Marie d'Aire, *Abd-el-Kader*, p. 247.

5 Mount Qasiyun contains some forty natural grottos called the "Sanctuary of the Forty Saints." The spiritual tradition of Islam mentions the existence of an "Assembly of Saints," *Diwan as-salihin*, who govern the universe. In the present case, the "Forty Saints" refer to a category of saints termed the ʿAbdal or "substitutes."

6 *Futuhat*, I, p. 530 cited by Claude Addas in *Ibn ʿArabi ou la Quête du soufre rouge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), p. 337.

7 Nizar Abada, *al-Amir Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi, al-ʿalimu al-Mujahidu* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr al Mu'assir, 1414h [1994]), pp. 34-38.

were in continual song, suddenly they fell silent."[8] There also is an inspired poem that was retained as an epitaph. Composed by Abd al-Majid al-Khani, a fellow disciple in the Sufic Way of Shaykh Ibn 'Arabi, it pays homage to the spiritual heir of the Prophet: "Saint and son of the Prophet, thou assuredly art. Thou hast received from the supreme Companion the grace of contemplation in the most sublime Stations of nearness."[9] The most significant tribute, however, came from the crowd that had swarmed into the surrounding narrow streets, representing the cultural and religious mosaic of the ancient Umayyad capital, reconciled for the duration of the ceremony around the memory of a man whose most fervent prayer had been precisely to unite the human family around a common principle.

In France, beginning Monday the 27th of May, most of the national dailies dedicated an article to the death of the Emir Abd el-Kader. Ranging from the most simple dispatch to the most glowing tributes, all acknowledged the historical significance of the event. *Le Figaro* (May 28, 1883), with the pen of the well-informed Henri d'Ideville, recalled the stature of the deceased: "The most redoubtable adversary that France encountered on African soil, the man who for sixteen years of heroic battles fought for his faith and for the independence of his country, Abd el-Kader is, unquestionably, the most important personage that has arisen in the last century among the Muslim populations." And he ended his article with the famous quote of Marshal Soult, the former president of the Council: "At present in the world there are only three men who can legitimately be called great, and all three pertain to [Islam]:[10] they are Abd el-Kader, Muhammad Ali, and Shamil."[11] *Le Temps* (May 28, 1883), which dedicated its front page to the event, emphasized the exceptional character of the personage: "His career was divided into two periods: the first was a true heroic epic; the second

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 "Islamism" in the original. In the nineteenth century, this term meant Islam, and not political Islam as it has come to mean in our day. In order to avoid any misinterpretation, and as an exception, we have substituted "Islam" for "Islamism."

11 Mehemed-Ali, or according to another spelling Muhammad Ali, was the viceroy of Egypt until his death in 1849. He introduced important reforms in his country. Imam Shamil (1797-1871) was the hero of the independence of the Caucasus against the Russian troops. He met the Emir Abd el-Kader in Egypt in 1869.

was a renunciation of all the tumult of the past. Judged from the standpoint of history, and aside from all the prejudices of our civilization, Abd el-Kader will appear as one of the most extraordinary men of our times." Some famous newspapers published engraved portraits of the Emir on the front page of their issues; for example, the *Journal illustré* (June 10, 1883) and also *La République illustrée* (June 9, 1883). The English and American newspapers were part of this editorial movement. On May 27, the *New York Times* published the dispatch of the son of the deceased in its obituary, in order to complete it several weeks later with a signed article by Ferdinand de Lesseps. The day after his demise, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (May 27, 1883) summed-up the general feeling prevailing then with the headline, "Death of Abd el-Kader, who once filled the world with his name."

Le Temps (May 28, 1883) recalled a curious fact that had occurred three years earlier. Between the years 1879 and 1880, the rumor of Abd el-Kader's death went around the world.[12] At the time, it gave rise to a succession of laudatory articles that were brought to the notice of the "deceased," who had "recovered from the attacks that had put his life in danger, and who read them with deep emotion, and then collecting himself for a few moments said, 'I rejoice that in France it was believed that I was dead; for through your newspapers I have acquired the certitude that my memory will be respected by the French; and that is a great happiness for me.'" Abd el-Kader al-Hasani, however, had never sought gratitude or any notoriety, nor still less posthumous glory. He was acutely aware of the evanescence of things human and had never claimed any of the merits attributed to him—an abnegation that he formulated in these terms: "I have not made events: it is events that have made me what I have been."[13] Nevertheless, it was the historical events in which he took part and the responses he gave to their challenges marking his life that have revealed him whom the chroniclers and historians have immortalized with the title of "Emir Abd el-Kader," and that have made him one of the great figures of his century.

12 *Le Petit Journal* of November 1879 and also *Le Monde illustré* of November 1879 announced on their front page the death of the Emir with a full page portrait. The *New York Times* of November 12, 1879, had the headline: "Death of Abd el-Kader, the Defender of Arab Nationality." It seems that a similar rumor was disseminated by the press at the beginning of 1874.

13 A.F.P. de Comte, *Mémoires d'un royalist* (Paris: Perrin, 1888), vol. 1, pp. 363-374.

Abd el-Kader bin Muhyi ad-Din was born seventy-five years earlier, in 1808,[14] in the West of the Ottoman Regency of Algiers, in a family of the religious nobility. In the religious and spiritual institution led by his father, seat of the Qadiriyya Sufic brotherhood of which he was also a representative, he acquired a classical knowledge that destined him to be dedicated to a religious career. The landing of French troops at the outskirts of Algiers in June of 1830 decided otherwise. In the fall of 1832, at the insistence of his father, he was placed at the head of the tribes of the province of Oran and acquired the title of Commander of the Faithful: that date marked his entry into history. Starting from almost nothing, without experience, within the space of a few years, the Emir Abd el-Kader developed a military organization and established the basis of a fledgling State. For more than fifteen years he held off the foremost army in the world and was able to impose two peace treaties allowing him to consolidate his administration. His refusal to compromise, his strength of soul in the face of setbacks, his magnanimity, aroused a current of sympathy in the very ranks of his adversaries. Already at that time, numerous testimonies emphasized

14 According to numerous sources, the birth date of Abd el-Kader bin Muhyi ad-Din al-Hasani lies between the years 1221 and 1223 of the hegira, which corresponds to the years 1806-1808 of the Julian calendar. The biographical essay that his son Muhammad Sa'id dedicates to him, *Tuhfat az-zair fi tarikh al-Jazair wal-Amir* (henceforth cited as *Tuhfat*; "Gift to the Pilgrim concerning the History of Algeria and the Emir" [Alexandria, 1903; Beirut, 1964]), indicates a precise date, 23 *rajab* 1222, which corresponds to the month of September, 1807. The same month and the same year are also indicated by another son of the Emir Abd el-Kader, al-Hashimi (Marie d'Aire, *Abd el-Qader*, p. 242). The family hagiography certainly draws from the same source as the English biography of the Emir: Charles Henry Churchill, in his biography *The Life of Abd-el-Qader, ex-Sultan of the Arabs of Algeria* (London: Chapman Hall, 1867), opts for the month of May 1807. Alexandre Bellemare, who in 1863 published his biography of the Emir, places his birth at the "beginning of the year 1223 of the hegira (1808)" (*Abd-el-Kader, sa vie politique et militaire* [Paris: Hachette, 1863], p. 10). The work of Léon Roches, *Trente-deux ans à travers l'Islam* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1884), mentions 15 *rajab* 1223, which corresponds to September 6, 1808. According to a biographical essay written under the supervision of Abd el-Kader during his captivity, it is the years 1221 and 1222 that are used, and thus repeat the data given by the sons and by Churchill. However, it is impossible to affirm anything on this question and to exclude one date over another. The only thing we are sure of is that everyone bases himself on an approximate oral tradition, hence subject to caution. Let us add finally that most of the later biographies published in France use the year 1808; such is the case, among others, of Paul Azan, or P. d'Estailleur-Chanteraine, to cite only the authors of the first half of the twentieth century.

the paradoxical character of the personage, at once warrior and saint: the Emir had chosen to nourish his political action by continual meditation. However, the scorched earth policy practiced by his emblematic adversary Marshal Bugeaud, reduced years of efforts to naught. Abandoned by a party of his own, harassed on all sides by French and Moroccan troops, Abd el-Kader agreed to give himself up, and in December of 1847 signed a treaty of surrender with the French Africa Army. Thereupon ended the first phase of his life. Victim of a perjurer, he was placed in captivity with a hundred of his companions. First held in Toulon, then in Pau, he spent four of his five years in captivity in Amboise, which in many respects was like a spiritual retreat, revealing a dimension that until then had been masked by the man of politics. It was also a period rich in dialogues at once cultural, intellectual, and religious. In October of 1852, the Emir was set free, and he definitively renounced political action.

The new stage of his life unfolded in the East. After a stay of two years in Bursa, Turkey, which he left in the spring of 1855, Abd el-Kader settled in Damascus, where he would end his days. He returned to France three times, notably in 1855 and 1867, on the occasion of the Universal Expositions which were then held in Paris. His intervention in favor of the Christians during the uprisings which took place against them in the Syrian capital in July of 1860, emphasized his humanist dimension and, more fundamentally, his conviction of a supra-confessional brotherhood. Yet, while tributes poured in from the whole world, the Emir continued his quest of the inexpressible through the study and teaching of the religious and spiritual traditions of Islam. In particular, he embarked on a subtle exegesis of the spiritual works of Shaykh Muhyi ad-Din Ibn ʿArabi, of which he became one of the first modern editors. During this time as well, the hidden face of the Sufi Abd el-Kader was fully revealed. In 1863, the encounter in Mecca with his spiritual master, Sidi Muhammad al-Fasi ash-Shadhili, gave a final decisive turn to his life. Under his direction, he entered into a spiritual retreat from which he emerged transfigured, full of an experience that illumined his view of the world, a view that was lucid and serene. Spiritual speculations did not, however, cut him off from the realities of his time, of which he became an enthusiastic and active witness. His support of the project to construct the Suez Canal, the inauguration of which he attended in November of 1869, attests to this. Proof of a resolutely modern thought, the support given to this project—the key

event of its century—had also been a tangible manifestation of his faith in a reconciliation of the human family. In the 1870s, the man little by little withdrew into silence, ending "his years," wrote a witness, "as he had begun them, in a retreat lit by his writings, and in the practice of his worship."[15] Nonetheless, he was not to fade into oblivion. He who during his very life had become at once a legend and a major figure of history would leave a posterity which he did not suspect.

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15 Lady Anne Blunt, *Voyage en Arabie, pèlerinage au Nedjed berceau de la race Arabe*, translated from the English by L. Derome (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1882), pp. 27-28.