

George Washington in Mascara

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Although it is home to less than fifteen hundred people, the town of Elkader, Iowa has become involved in a protracted dialogue with the Arab world. Named for the Algerian nationalist leader Abd al-Qader al-Jaza'iri, Elkader is only municipality in the United States that bears the name of a Muslim or an Arab. Since 1979, political and economic actors within the US State Department have exploited this heritage to clarify the relationship between US foreign policy and Islam. Confronted by rising Islamist movements, Elkader has served as a sign of America's good faith towards the larger Muslim world. Recently, business and political leaders in Elkader have taken their town's international reputation as an opportunity to spark investment in community development schemes. Over the last ten years, its founders' entirely imaginary relationship to Abd al-Qader has become the basis for a thriving tourist economy.

Although it has brought the community new prosperity, this economy is not without its critics. In a place where little distinction is made between Muslims and Arabs, and both are understood to be antagonists in the War on Terror, for many, Elkader's relationship to Abd al-Qader is nothing to celebrate. To counter such critiques, Elkader community leaders have engaged in their own course of public education, offering up Abd al-Qader, his politics, and his faith in a distinctly American idiom. Through interviews with local community leaders and Elkader residents, this paper will explore the process by which Abd al-Qader has been translated for Elkader. It will argue that the Americanization of Abd al-Qader is part of the hegemonic struggle over the tropes that animate contemporary geopolitics. As such, it presents an opportunity to engage the discursive oppositions that underlie popular support for the War on Terror.