



## Mémoires. Tome 1: Les contours d'une vie, 1929-1979

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the national movement. His indictment of the political bureau of the PPA-MTLD in these crucial years is unflinching, yet in many respects he is less interested in judging the past than in warning future generations of the dangers of mythologising anti-colonial heroes.

In many respects, Ali Yahia is, decades later, Frantz Fanon's idealised intellectual, as posited in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004, p. 148), 'work[ing] away with raging heart and furious mind to renew contact with [his] people's oldest, inner essence, the furthest removed from colonial times'. One cannot help but notice, of course, that this goal requires Ali Yahia to provide new heroes to represent his Algerian ideal. While students of modern nationalism may cringe at such essentialist claims of 'true' culture and national 'essences', these categories matter deeply in the multiparty age of identity politics. Ali Yahia acknowledges the power of myth and its complicated relationship to history: 'Plus que tout autre science, l'Histoire abonde en mythe et légendes. Le souvenir du passé est mythifié et il ne peut y avoir de mythification que si le mythe entretient des souvenirs oraux et écrits' (31). In this sense his book will be a lasting, divisive and important contribution to the ongoing debate over (and construction of) Algerian national identity.

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**Mémoires. Tome 1: Les contours d'une vie, 1929-1979**, by Chadli Bendjedid and Abdelaziz Boubakir, translated from the Arabic by Mehenna Hamadouche, Algiers, Casbah Éditions, 2012, 336 pp., DA 1000 (paperback), ISBN: 978-9961-64-933-6

Chadli Bendjedid was Algeria's third president, but his memoirs may disappoint all but the most intrepid Algeria watchers, as they stop in 1979, just after the death of Houari Boumediene and without even getting into the politics of the succession. Volume 2, originally scheduled for publication in March 2013, has been delayed, ostensibly because of disagreements between the editor and Chadli's family. The Algiers daily *L'Expression* claimed, in February 2017, that it would soon appear, but meanwhile Volume 1 still deserves attention (*Mémoires oubliés de Chadli Bendjedid 2017*).

The final twelve pages, in which Chadli reflects on his relations with Boumediene, nicely summarise the latter's careful style of leadership, constantly consulting with his major constituents – the Oujda Group (which included Abdelaziz

Bouteflika), the commanders of the Military Regions (such as Chadli, who headed MR2 in Oran), French army deserters (among them Khaled Nezzar), and his special advisors (notably Belaïd Abdesselam and Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi) – although Chadli does not analyse the balance of forces that conditioned his succession to the presidency. The only foretaste we have of Chadli's future career is his parting shot at 'those persons who accuse me of having sent Boumediene into the dustbin of history ... and describe as the 'dark decade' the period in which I was president of the Republic'. As president, Chadli indeed reversed Algeria's poorly integrated industrialisation programme, but its architect, Belaïd Abdesselam, was not the only person to view Chadli's 1980s as the 'dark decade'. Even in the military, many high officers viewed the disengagement of the state and tentative liberalisation of the polity and economy as inviting the Islamist excesses of the 1990s. It is, ironically, the 1990s that has come to be known as the 'dark decade' in Algerian discourse, overwriting any dark side to Chadli's legacy.

Chadli's memoirs deserve careful study because they open the black box of military politics, even if much more about the 'deciders' is likely to be revealed in Volume 2 in the event it is published. He offers a balanced perspective as a participant observer in much of the intrigue he experienced on the eastern front during the 1954–1962 war of independence and in subsequent coups and attempted coups. He earned the military seniority that led to his becoming president by being Boumediene's straightforward and virtually unconditional ally since 1960. He proudly recalls the president introducing him to Tunisian Prime Minister Bahi Ladgham as his '*chou-chou*' and cites Taleb-Ibrahimi's recollection of Boumediene's praise for him as 'the only member of the Council of the Revolution about whom I could never complain' (326).

Chadli came from a *grande famille*, as he describes the Bendjedids. Supposed descendants of a Yemeni tribe, his father was a large landowner in the region just east of Annaba, not far from the Mediterranean and Tunisian border. Father and son were in contact with the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) leadership in their district almost immediately after the outbreak of the war of independence. Chadli joined the maquis in late February 1955, to escape a second and potentially terminal police convocation; for the record, he also claims – contradicting official accounts – that he had never joined the French military, nor had his father ever served the colonial administration. The closest Chadli ever came to the French administration was his work after vocational high school training in an agricultural service cooperative, Tabacoop. In the two years prior to the outbreak of the war, he claims he was at home hunting. Not that he distrusted other combatants for their earlier service in the French army – unless they were among the French army officers who joined the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN) after De Gaulle came to power in 1958. Chadli shared Boumediene's suspicions that these latter men were possibly part of a French third force strategy to influence the ALN from within. In Volume 1, he names five of these officers – Abdelkader Chabou, Mohammed Zerguini, Rabah Mohamed Boutella, Slimane Hoffman, and Lt. Abdelmoumene (170) – and also observes that he integrated Lt. Khaled Nezzar into his regional command despite much opposition among his soldiers (173), and that Lt. Larbi Belkheir was demoted for insubordination shortly after

independence (224). Chadli strongly defends Boumediene's pragmatic use of the late deserters, generally keeping them in staff positions where they could best serve him in effecting the transition of the ALN from loose coalitions of guerrilla forces into a disciplined standing army.

Chadli's wartime career vividly illustrated the transition. He rose from being a sergeant in charge of a squad in 1955 to becoming an officer in charge of a region in 1956 and then of its entire zone – the northeast bordering on Tunisia – in 1958. The zone was one of three comprising what was called the Eastern Base, which bordered Wilaya 2 (Nord-Constantinois) to the west and Wilaya 1 (Aurès) to the south. His father's friend, Amara Bouglez (also transliterated as Bouguellaz), was a former French army veteran who headed the Eastern Base until Algeria's Provisional Government (GPRA) terminated it in late 1958 and exiled a demoted Bouglez to the FLN representation in Baghdad. The Eastern Base had always been problematic. The FLN's 1956 Soummam Congress had not recognised it as an entity independent of Wilaya 2. After the enforced departure of Bouglez, some of his fellow officers resisted the GPRA in the so-called 'Colonels' Plot' that was being hatched on the Tunisian side of the border. In Chadli's version of the story, the so-called plotters were actually trying to figure out how to most effectively penetrate the Morice and Challe electric barriers, to resupply their forces inside Algeria. The key controversy was over the GPRA's insistence on accelerating entry 'under quasi-impossible conditions' (140), but the GPRA had persuaded the Tunisians that the dissident officers were determined not only to overthrow the GPRA (controlled at the time by the 'three Bs' – Abdelhafid Boussouf, Belkacem Krim, and Lakhdar Ben Tobbal – under the presidency of Ferhat Abbas) but also to replace President Habib Bourguiba by Salah Ben Youssef. The Tunisian National Guard then arrested the plotters and handed them over to the GPRA. A military tribunal headed by Col. Boumediene subsequently executed four of them in 1959.

Newly promoted to zone commander in 1958, Chadli served the GPRA and then the General Staff under Boumediene from early 1960, in transforming the border forces into a modern army. Relations remained tense between Wilaya 2 on the other side of electric barriers and what used to be the Eastern Base. Chadli's memoir sheds new light on the 'Constantine coup' of 25 July 1962, just three weeks after Algerian independence. He became independent Algeria's first political prisoner, caught in the conflict between Ben Bella and the GPRA. He represented Boumediene, who, needing political cover, had aligned with Ben Bella after the cease-fire accords of March 1962. Chadli led a couple of small detachments into Algeria in mid-May 1962 to confer with representatives of Wilaya 2, who had rejected command by Boumediene's external General Staff and sided with the GPRA. Chadli brought them arms but after several days, once the national negotiations in Tripoli broke down, he was arrested, confined for more than a month in a dungeon, and believed he was about to be executed. He was finally freed on 24 July, with Boumediene's forces occupying Constantine on the following day. This reviewer was surprised three or four days later, on driving from Tunis to Algiers, to find the FLN headquarters virtually deserted except for one notable, Mohamed-Cherif Messaâdia, whom Chadli

indicates had discreetly sided with him in an argument with Krim and Ben Tobbal three years earlier (143). Ben Tobbal, by the way, had been one of the many just arrested on 25 July (214).

After independence, Chadli continued to command forces in the Constantine region and relieved his immediate chief, Commandant Si Larbi, when the latter, in October 1962, broadcast his opposition to Boumediene and Ben Bella over a local radio station. Boumediene then designated Chadli to reorganise and head the new Constantine Military Region (MR5) in 1963. By October, Boumediene confided to him that his relations with Ben Bella had seriously deteriorated, and Ben Bella incited another regional commander, Mohamed Chabani of MR4 (Biskra), to rebel against Boumediene. Chadli contained the revolt without firing a shot, but he was later obliged to serve on a military tribunal that condemned Chabani to death on Ben Bella's orders. In his memoirs, Chadli is careful to clear Boumediene of any influence over this cruel decision. He also argues that his own transfer in late 1964 to command the Oran MR2 was not in any way related to the preparations to unseat Ben Bella on 19 June 1965, even though the original plan had been to arrest him on 17 June in Oran. The Oran command became the strategically most important one after the border war with Morocco in late 1963. From his post in Oran, Chadli subsequently played a key role in countering Tahar Zbiri's attempted coup against Boumediene in 1967. Chadli recalls that the plotters had tried to gain his support; he also offers convincing evidence that a hesitant one, Saïd Abid, really did commit suicide – after failing to support the coup.

The first volume of this memoir is full of rich anecdotes but is somewhat repetitive and disorganised, and not always keeping chronological order. A chronology of events would have been helpful for the reader. There is little policy content apart from Chadli's brief observation that he was 'one of the first to appeal for constitutional legitimacy to replace historical legitimacy for the building of a democratic Algeria' (23). He does indicate his regrets, however, over not having supported Ahmed Kaïd in his opposition to the Agrarian Revolution that Boumediene launched in 1971. And he displays his political cunningness in turning down Boumediene's offer in 1974 to succeed Ahmed Medeghri as interior minister, for fear of being boxed in by various intelligence services. Chadli remained his own man in Oran until November 1978, when the dying president appointed him minister of defence.

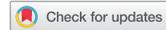
He also points in this volume to his close alliance with Taleb-Ibrahimi in planning for the congress of the FLN in 1978. Chadli even seemed ready to exert pressure on Boumediene for a time line to hold the congress and to fight rampant corruption. He claims he bought an apartment in Algiers to display a credible threat to resign if things did not change. But Boumediene fell ill (Waldenström syndrome), and it is left to the reader to speculate whether Chadli's eventual efforts to promote democracy and economic reform were predicated in part on containing the Islamists in 1991–1992 with the help of Taleb-Ibrahimi. Volume 2 of his memoirs, should it see the light of day, will hopefully clarify the matter.

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**Terre des femmes**, by Nassira Belloula, Algiers, Chihab Éditions, 2014, 188 pp., DA 650 (paperback), ISBN 978-9947-39-062-7

Algerian writer-journalist Nassira Belloula, who resides in Montreal, has published numerous works of fiction and non-fiction: novels, essays, short stories, and poetry. Her literary career began in Algeria with the publication of a collection of poetry, *Les Portes du Soleil* (Algiers: Enal, 1988). Her first work of non-fiction, *Algérie, le massacre des innocents* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), focuses on the killing of civilians during the Islamist insurgency and army counter-insurgency of the 1990s. Her first novel, *La revanche de May* (Algiers: Enag, 2003; Montreal: La Pleine Lune, 2010), earned Belloula the *Arts et Culture de l'Espace Femmes Arabes du Québec* literary prize. Relating the lives of four generations of Algerian women, this work introduces the narrative framework she applies to her most recent one, *Terre des femmes*, which is a history of several generations of women of the Aurès during the colonial period. The novel received the 2016 Prix Kateb Yacine – Algeria's major literary award – which is a tribute to an Algerian writer committed to exploring her Berber heritage.

Set among the author's native Chaouia population and grounded in the history of the Aurès region, this historical novel opens in the mid-1840s, during the initial period of French colonisation, and then takes readers up to the early years of the Algerian War. Alternating dramatic scenes of violence and passion with pastoral scenes that express the villagers' attachment to their land – often in lyrical prose – the text adopts the form of an epic as it depicts the lives of six generations of women in one family. As each protagonist meets life's challenges, she not only survives but, by drawing upon the courage and fortitude of her foremothers, instills in the next generation of women the same sense of determination bequeathed to her. Throughout the text, a sense of continuity is achieved as each generation produces the next generation of daughters, adding another member to the maternal lineage.

Assuming the role of storyteller to relate the family saga chronologically, the author begins with Zwina, the 'founding mother' of this distinctly female