

BOOK REVIEW

5 **Chroniques et réflexions inédites sur des thèmes sur un passé pas très**
lointain, by Bélaïd Abdesselam, Boudouaou, Dar Khettab, 2017, 456 pp.,
AQ1 DA 1500 (softcover), ISBN 978-9931-42923-4

10 Bélaïd Abdesselam (born 1928) was one of independent Algeria's brightest and
most controversial civilian ministers. He was best known for conceptualising
and spearheading the ambitious 1970s effort to industrialise Algeria. Prior to inde-
pendence, he mobilised Algerian students in support of the revolution and sent
many to study in different countries, a number of whom subsequently assisted
him in managing independent Algeria's economy. Abdesselam is also one of
15 Algeria's most prolific political commentators. His two volumes of interviews –
totaling 880 pages – published in 1990 broke the wall of silence about Algeria's
internal politicking between civilian administrators and military leaders (Ben-
noune and El-Kenz 1990).

20 In this final version of hitherto 'unpublished' reflections, he goes over much of
the ground already covered in the earlier two volumes, in an additional book on
oil and gas (Abdesselam 2012), and in an online commentary on his thirteen
months as prime minister following the 1992 assassination of President
Mohammed Boudiaf (Abdesselam 2007). This new book, concluded shortly
before Abdesselam suffered a major stroke, is less carefully edited than his
25 earlier works but offers further insights into Algeria's political culture and one of
its most extraordinary personalities (Henry 2012, 101–161). It consists of 23 chap-
ters of lengths varying between two and 58 pages written at various times since
2010. They are briefly introduced as 'themes marking his life as a militant of the
PPA' (Parti du Peuple Algérien, founded in 1937 by Messali Hadj), which he had
joined at the age of 16, when it was an illegal party operating clandestinely. In
30 other words, he continued throughout his career to view himself as a radical
nationalist member of a political party founded well before the Front de Libération
Nationale (FLN) launched the Algerian revolution in 1954, despite the fact that
joining the FLN required Communists and members of other Algerian parties to
shed their previous affiliations.

35 Abdesselam thus implies in his introduction that such a rule did not apply to
PPA members, at least not to himself. He also offers some evidence of confusion
within the ranks of the FLN that could allow him a free pass. Despite the fact that
in early 1956 he held no formal position in the new structures of the FLN, its
Algiers leadership already perceived him to be serving them in supervising the
General Union of Algerian Muslim Students (UGEMA) and was annoyed when
40 UGEMA's first president appeared to be sidestepping him (194–195). Abdesse-
lam's senior contact in Algiers was none other than Benyoucef Benkhedda, the
former general secretary of the PPA's legal wing, the Mouvement pour le
Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques (MTLD), who had headed the MTLD's
Central Committee when, in 1953, Abdesselam, as a student leader at the

University of Algiers, was co-opted into it. Abdesselam had also earlier been acquainted with Ramdane Abane, an officer in the PPA's short-lived, clandestine paramilitary wing, the Organisation Spéciale, who, after his release from prison on 19 January 1955, was mandated by Belkacem Krim and other FLN leaders to set up the FLN's political infrastructure. Abane in turn co-opted Benkhedda. Personal connections essentially determined who was in the FLN leadership and in what capacity. Abdesselam saw no contradiction between serving an FLN led almost exclusively by former PPA leaders and upholding the party's radical nationalist ideals as he understood them, living up to the oath he had sworn at the age of 16 (whereas there were no rituals associated with joining the FLN!).

He devotes two of his longest chapters, some 104 pages, to attacking the culture of nationalism associated with the reformist Ulama movement and propagated after independence by Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi, the son of its founder's successor, Bachir El Ibrahimi (1889–1965). He rejects any opportunistic claims, such as those of Tawfiq Al Madani, exposed by James McDougall (2006, 228–231), that it was somehow the Ulama rather than the PPA that had mobilised the Algerian nation and made the revolution. He bitterly attacks Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi, whom he had earlier recruited to head the student movement, for using his ministerial authority under President Houari Boumediene to propagate these claims by posting former Ulama into key positions in Algeria's education and culture establishments (138–139, 200), and even making the anniversary of the death of the reformist Ulama founder, Abdelhamid Ben Badis, 17 April 1940, the 'Youm el ilm' (Day of Science), to be celebrated every year. Instead, Abdesselam argues, 19 May 1956, the day Algerian students went on a general unlimited strike against colonial oppression, would be a more appropriate annual reminder 'that knowledge, or *ilm*, is only to be found in liberty and dignity ...' (151). Abdesselam is no friend of Islamism of any sort and criticised Taleb in his student days for considering himself more Muslim than Algerian, whereas 'the two notions of *algérianité* and Islam are indissociable' (179).

The longest chapter, concerning the circumstances leading to Abdesselam's appointment as prime minister in July 1992, presents an inside view of a prime minister's offices cluttered with desks occupied by personal staffs of previous prime ministers – humourously called the *chefferie* of the government (249). One task of an incoming prime minister is to make more space for his staff by placing holdovers of previous ones elsewhere in the state administration. One of those left by Abdesselam's predecessor, Sid Ahmed Ghazali, was a certain Salah Lakoues, whom Abdesselam discovered to be 'abouché à des individus relevant de la faune d'aventuriers qui polluent les milieu financiers internationaux à la recherché d'affaires douteuses, généralement au détriment des pays en voie de développement' (250). The new prime minister quickly got rid of Lakoues but then subsequently, just after Abdesselam was dismissed from office in August 1993, Lakoues published an article insulting him. The article claimed, among other things, that Abdesselam had conspired to replace Ghazali and that President Boudiaf had initially refused to receive him, calling him a *ferrailleur* (scrap metal dealer, alluding to the failures of Algerian industrialisation). Abdesselam has reprinted the article in an almost illegible appendix and uses it to organise his

own recollection of the events at issue. His reasons for devoting so much space to an article written more than 15 years earlier were to clarify his relationships with his longtime friend and ally, Sid Ahmed Ghozali, and with Mohammed Boudiaf, whom he had first met in 1953.

85 Ghozali (born 1937) was the engineer tapped by Abdesselam in 1965 to run Sonatrach, Algeria's state oil and gas company. They both fell out of favour with the *pouvoir* after Boumediene's death in 1978, but Ghozali accepted ministerial positions after 1988, whereas Abdesselam insisted that President Chadli Bendjedid, under whom Algeria had deindustrialised, be removed and his economic policies reversed. Abdesselam could not countenance the economic reform programme undertaken in 1989 and by 1991, when Ghozali was appointed prime minister, contacts between the two friends (whose wives were sisters) became less frequent. Abdesselam insists, however, that he never intrigued to succeed his erstwhile junior ally as prime minister. He also lays to rest any idea that he had tried through other influential connections to contact Boudiaf. Indeed, 90 mutual friends from PPA days had insisted Abdesselam should call upon the new president after his return from exile in Morocco in January 1992. Abdesselam explains that he did not request an audience out of respect for the rules of the PPA, under which subordinates are not supposed to request audiences of their superiors. 'Ah, if that's the way it is, he is in the right', so said Boudiaf, as reported by an honest go-between (272). Abdesselam also proudly relates how, at a public meeting, when one of his allies asked Boudiaf whether it was bad to be defending Abdesselam's policies, the President replied no, not at all, that this concerned someone who was 'nationaliste, intègre et travailleur' (278). These words best sum up how Bélaïd Abdesselam may be remembered.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2018.1548838>

