

The Algerians and The Palestine Question 1947-1962

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Before anything else one should emphasize that ideologically the Algerian nationalists identified themselves with arabism. In their search for identity, the Algerian affirmed themselves as Arabs and Muslims and, in this sense, the Palestine question was considered as a part of this search. Moreover, the Algerian nationalists understood the Zionist aggression in three ways: as a religious aggression against Islam and the Muslim community, as an aggression against The Arab nation, and sometimes, as an imperialist aggression. The three points may be combined, but the order of importance depended on the socio-political status of the party which adopted them.

Several developments occurred in this period both in Algeria and in Palestine. In 1948, Israel was established and Palestine was removed from the international political map. In Algeria, The nationalist movements became closer not only in their position towards their own future , but also in their position towards the palestinian problem. By 1947, most of the Algerian nationalist movements had changed their names. And their positions towards Palestine became more encouraging.

1- The Democratic Union of the Algerian Manifesto

In 1946 Ferhat Abbas organized the Union Democratique du Manifesto Algerian (UDMA), which advocated an autonomous Amlgeria federated to france. As the successor to the Federation of the Elected Movement, UDMA's position toward Pa lestine followed the same line of analysis. No references were made to pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism.

At the end of the UDMA's central committee meeting on 31st December 1947, the following important resolution on Palestine was published ⁽¹⁾

-The Central Committee denounces Zionism which is of colonialist and racist origin and tendency.

-Stands againts the UN partition resolution which aims at creating an artificial state and disregarding the Palestinian people.

-Affirms that the only possible solution lies in making Palestine an independent state where arabs and Jews could be equal citizens.

-Deplores French acceptance of this division.

-Protests against the formation of clandestine camps for the Zionists; the military training given to these elements and their departure to Palestine from Algerian coast.

- Considers these actions against the Arabs of Palestine as actions of hostility against the Arabs of Algeria.

Although the UDMA criticized, the movement was still proposing unrealistic solutions to the problem of Palestine. Ferhat Abbas suggested the creation of a state where Jews and Arabs could live as equal citizens. Meanwhile, the UDMA's disappointment over French policies in Algeria and their conviction that assimilation had failed were echoed when they deplored French attitude at the U.N.

Therefore, although Ferhat Abbas was still far away from pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, the resolution of UDMA's central committee made a clear link between the Arabs in Algeria and those of Palestine.

The UDMA adopted similar positions in 1948. From 1949, however, the Palestinian problem became rarely mentioned by the movement. Indeed, neither in the UDMA's second congress (september 1949), or in the third congress (september 1951) was the Palestinian problem discussed. It seemed that other internal and more urgent problems in Algeria itself overshadowed the external questions ⁽²⁾..

2- The Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties

The MTLD was the successor of the PPA. On the Palestinian problem the movement maintained the same analysis. Its ideas were advocated in two newspapers, "L'Algerie libre" and "Al-Maghreb El Arabi" ⁽³⁾. Their publication continued from October 1947 until 1954.

On 15th December 1947 Al-Maghreb El Arabi wrote "The UN came came to undertake a fatal decision. It played the Zionist imperialist game when it decided to partition Palestine...The Arabs of Algeria...will never recognize the fascist state. They condemn Zionism and imperialism which tries to transform Palestine to a military base with the task of subjugating all the middle east."

After the creation of Israel, the newspapers wrote on 25th July 1948.

"The war which the Arab are fighting in Palestine against Zionist imperialism shows that the Arabs are not facing the Zionists only, but a coalition of powerful imperialists"

To the MTLD a confrontation had declared between all the Arabs and all the imperialist powers which had contributed in the creation of Israel. France was certainly included.

The same line of analysis was maintained until the creation of the FLN and the outbreak of the war of independence. In 1954 Al-Maghreb El Arabi wrote:

"Since its creation....Israel....is still a unique adventure, a "case", an artificial creation and a risk....its existence....can not continue without external contribution."

After the creation of the Arab league in 1945, Cairo became the ground for the Arab nationalists'activities. Represented by Chadli Mekki and later Mohamed Khider, the PPA opened a "bureau" in cairo ⁽⁴⁾. The Algerian nationalists went to Cairo to find support for their cause. Once there, they found themselves in close relations with the Palestinians who had similar cause. Because the Algerian nationalists were near the palestinian drama, they were forced to follow the development of the problem.

In an interview with the researcher, Chadli Mekki indicated that he had attended several meetings concerning the Palestinian problem ⁽⁵⁾. In march 1946, he was among three Maghrebi Leaders who submitted a memorandum on Palestine to theRoyal commission investigating the situation of Palestine. The memorandum strongly advocated the independence of Palestine, for "it is a problem on which depends peace and war" ⁽⁶⁾

The MTLD had since 1947 made efforts, especially among the Algerian workers in France, to raise donations for the cause of Palestine. At one single time, according to Chadli Mekki, 11 million French Francs were collected. The money was sent to Arabs in Palestine through the Egyptian Embassy in Paris ⁽⁷⁾.

By the 1950's, however, the MTLD became fully preoccupied by the situation in Algeria. At its second congress in 1953, no rasolution concerning Palestine was adopted ⁽⁸⁾. On 14 th January 1954, Mohamed Khider, the party's delegate to cairo, made one single remark concerning the Palestinian problem.He indicated that "as Palestine constituted, to the imperialists, a Zionist bridge to the Arab East, so Algeria serves as a base from which domination over the Arab East becomes possible".

To the MTL, therefore, Palestine "had constituted", Algeria "serves". The Palestinian problem belonged to the past, the present was Algeria. The priority of Algeria over Palestine was what the party wanted understood by all the Arabs.

3- The Uiam

The Uiam's analysis based on pan- Arabism and pan-Islamism had not changed. Their determination to liberate Palestine had been enhanced after 1947. Following the partition plan accepted by the UN, Mohamed Bachir Ibrahim wrote a series of articles in El Bassair. He analysed the historical background of the problem and called for Algerians to make it their cause.

On 20 th September 1947, El Bassair discussed the UN partition plan and emphasized at the end of its long article that "we, in Algeria are waiting, and ready to take part in the struggle for the liberation of Palestine" ⁽⁹⁾. Emphasizing that "all the imperialists agree against the Arabs", another article called for a holy war.

With the collaboration of Ferhat Abbas on 6th June 1948, the Uiam created an "Algerian committee for the support of Palestine" ⁽¹⁰⁾. The committee declared that "the Arabs of North Africa have a sacred duty in helping the Palestinians", and insisted that "the measures of French colonialism can not be considered as an excuse for not fighting the Israeli and British assault which is the beginning and the end of evil" ⁽¹¹⁾.

As a response to the Committee's appeal, a number of Algerians went to Palestine and took part in the struggle. According to Chadli Mekki ⁽¹²⁾, 1000 Algerians participated in the 1948 war. 600 of them died and were buried in Palestine.

Meanwhile the Uiam opened the way for donations. Bachir Ibrahim donated all his private library, except for a copy of the Koran, as an example of encouragement.

4- The National Liberation Front, FLN

The founding of the FLN in 1954 came as a result of the failure of the nationalist parties since the 1920s to achieve independence. Armed struggle was to the FLN its *raison d'être*. The new revolutionary party insisted on the unity of the Algerians and the use of force as a means of gaining freedom. The FLN eventually led the country to independence in July 1962.

Until the ceasefire of early 1962, the FLN made little public reference to Palestine. In effect, the movement was preoccupied by the development of the war in Algeria. The war of independence needed the concentration of all the party's energy.

The silence of the FLN had also several reasons.

- Since 1956, the Palestinian problem had become Nasser's affair. Because Nasser was giving important support to the FLN the latter's leaders had no intention to challenge their supporter with any untimely declarations.
- The FLN was hoping to have the support of the French leftist political organizations, which had sympathy with Israel.
- The FLN silence aimed at calming the fears of Algerian Jews, whom it was planning to enlist in its struggle. To this end, the FLN failed. Most Algerian Jews preferred Algeria to remain French.⁽¹³⁾

With the lack of a clear public policy on Palestine, the FLN adopted few particular positions on the problem. *El Moudjahid*, which was published for the first time in June 1958, was the only organ of the Algerian revolution. 89 issues were studied in which no position was taken on the Palestine question.

Meanwhile, Omar Kadri admitted in an interview with the author that several contacts took place between Algerian and Palestinian nationalists. In the late 1950s, for example, Boumediene and Khider met Arafat⁽¹⁴⁾.

Arafat himself stated,

"I started my contacts with the Algerian revolutionaries in the 1950s. I was, in fact, in very good dialogue with them before they began their long struggle in 1954. I stayed in touch with them and they promised they would help us when they achieved their independence. I never doubted for one moment that they would win and that their victory would be very important for us"⁽¹⁵⁾.

When victory appeared certain, the FLN became more outspoken in its position towards Palestine. On 10th April 1962, Youssef Benkhedda, the GPRA President, declared that "the ALN will help Nasser to conquer Israel".⁽¹⁶⁾ In May 1961, the Egyptian Information Agency announced that Ben Bella, vicepresident of the GPRA, had declared that he was ready to send 100,000 Algerian soldiers to

Palestine ⁽¹⁷⁾.

Meanwhile, the Zionist leaders were paying great attention to the development of the situation in Algeria. In an answer to a question on "what should be the attitude of the Algerian jews who were subject to the pressure of the OAS and the FLN", Golda Meir replied at the end of May 1962.

"I think that wisdom obliges all the inhabitants of Algeria including the Jews of this country to collaborate, in order to realize the Evian agreements". ⁽¹⁸⁾

On the 25th June 1962, Golda Meir appealed to the emerging state of Algeria to resist involvement in the Arab circle's hostility towards Israel, and to adopt an independent policy towards the Jewish state. She offered the Algerian leaders the same kind of cooperation of cooperation which Israel had been giving to scores of developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Consequently, an Israeli Red Cross team was dispatched to Algiers. ⁽¹⁹⁾

Through these activities, Israel hoped to make Algeria an ally or at least a moderate state with regard to her position on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Algerian responses were categorical. Mohamed Yazid, the G. P. R. A Minister of Information, declared:

"Our position maintained that Palestine is an Arab state ... A state called Israel was installed instead. We will not recognize such a state ... Indeed, on this question we have the same policy as that of other Arab states. Meanwhile, this position has no relation with the G. P. R. A policies towards the Algerian Jews who should fear no discrimination". ⁽²⁰⁾

Naturally, the Israeli Red Cross team was refused. This, however, did not prevent Israel recognizing the Algerian Republic four days after it was proclaimed. ⁽²¹⁾

Whatever the F. L. N position toward Palestine was, The Algerian war of Independence had an important impact on Palestinian nationalists of the time. Abu Jihad has emphasized that in his move with Arafat for the creation of FATAH movement.

"... We were inspired by the revolutions that were taking place in the world. The revolution in Algeria was burning like a strong flame of hope in front of us. When the Algerians started their revolution in 1954, they were only some few hundred Arabs against 20.000 French troops and well-armed settlers

with much combat experience. The revolution in Algeria was to us the proof that a people can organize themselves and build their military power during the fighting".⁽²²⁾

After independence on 5th July 1962, the importance of Algerian policy lay in political, material and military contribution to the Palestinian cause, rather than articles and declarations without real importance in world politics.

Foot Notes

- 1- Published in *l'Egalité*, n° 109, of 2 ed. January 1948.
- 2- See respectively *La République Algérienne* n° 193 of 23rd September 1949, and n°292 of 21st September 1951. See also J. P. Chagnollaude, thesis, op. cit., pp. 105 – 106.
- 3- *L'Algérie Libre*, was issued in October 1949 in French until 1954, *Al Maghreb Al Arabi* was published in Arabic, but it had a regular supplement in French.
- 4- *L'Algérie libre*, n°96 (1953)
- 5- The interview took place in Algiers with the author 2nd June 1985. Between 1947 and 1949 Chadli Mekki attended several meetings on the Palestinian problem in Cairo.
- 6- The previous interview with Chadli Mekki. See also Habib Bourguiba, *Tunis wa Qadiyyat Falistin* (Tunisia and the Palestinian question) (Secretariat d'Etat à l'Information et à l'Orientalion, Tunis, 1966), pp. 22 – 29.
- 7- Author's interview with Chadli Mekki.
- 8- *L'Algérie libre*, 7th August, 1953.
- 9- *El Bassir*, n° 8, 26th September 1947; see also n° 17, 29th December 1947.
- 10- The members of the Committee were Bachir El Ibrahim, Taibi El Okbi, Ibrahim Bayoud (from the UIama) and Ferhat Abbas. Messali Hadj refused to participate for party reasons. See *El Bassair*, No. 41, 1948
- 11- *Revue Française des sciences politiques*, August, 1966.
- 12- Interview with Chadli Mekki.
- 13- A famous letter to the Jews of Algeria was published in *El Moudjahid*, No, 4, November 1956, in which they were asked to affirm in a solemn way their belonging to the Algerian nation' see I.W.Zartman, *Government and Politics in Northern Africa* (Praeger, New York, 1963), p.61
- 14- Authors interview with Omar Kadri (Responsible for the Palestinian Information Centre in Algiers since 1962) on 9th May 1985 in Algiers. He said that Ben Bella could be one of the Algerians who met Arafat either in Tunis or in Cairo. Khider, Omar Kadri said in Cairo in 1954. See Nicole Grimaud, *La Politique Exterieur de l'Algerie-1962-1978* (these de Doctorat d'Etat en Science Politique, Institut d'Etude Politiques de Paris, 1984), p.29, nf.
- 15- In Alan Hart, *Arafat, Terrorist or Peacemaker?* (Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1984), p.133.
- 16- Given with precaution in *la Revue de Presse*, Alger, No.64-1964.
- 17- J.P. Chagnollaude, thesis, op.cit. p.111.
- 18 *Le Monde*, 31st May 1962.

19- The Times, 25th June 1962, p.11.

20- Le Monde, 15-16th July 1962 and 12th July 1962.

21- Ibid.

22- Alan Hart, op.cit.,p.123.