

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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22 Chemin Tayyebi
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ALGERIA III

Mr. Peter Martin
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Wheelock House
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Dear Peter,

North Africa has been in the news a couple of times this month. The assassination of Abu Jihad, the PLO's second-in-command, in Tunisia's Sidi Bou Said brought back memories of weekends last summer when I would often drive past his villa on my way to the beach. I remember pointing out to friends how easy it would be for a murder squad to get past the bored couple of bodyguards at the entrance. To the Tunisian leaders the assassination has once again brought home the uneasy consequences of housing the PLO and its representatives. My readers may remember that the Israelis bombed the organization's headquarters in one of Tunis's suburbs a couple of years ago.

The latest assassination will undoubtedly result in even greater police control inside the country. To those of us who have visited Tunisia on and off for a number of years and who have been traveling extensively within the country, it is almost hard to imagine that security can be increased even further. Even routine trips these last years between Tunis and Nabeul, sixty kilometers away, were inevitably interrupted by police check-ups. On my last trip from the capital to Nefta (near the Algerian border) I was stopped five times. When I first came to Tunisia ten years ago all of this was unheard of.

The second incident was the landing of a hijacked Kuwaiti airliner here in Algiers. For a few days journalists and wire service personnel vied with each other for rooms at the Al-Djazair and the Aurassi hotels,

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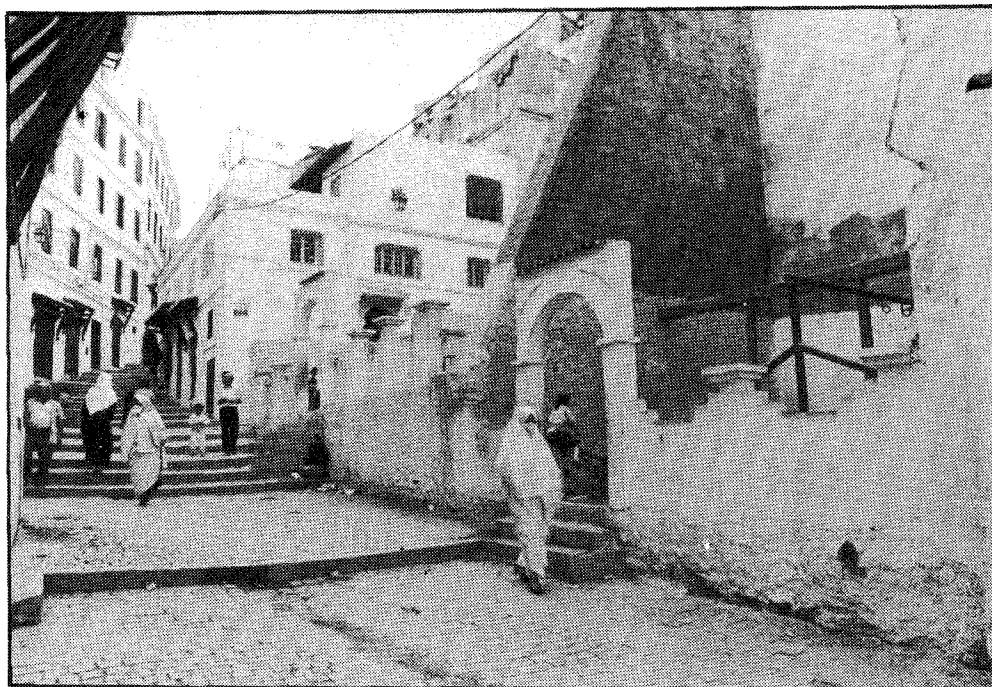


Downtown Algiers. A small group of Islamists have gathered under the tree in the background.

suddenly leaving when the crisis was resolved with the help of Algerian intermediaries. As all previous mediation efforts in which the Algerians have been involved, the hijacking, the negotiations surrounding the release of the hostages and the secret departure of the hijackers was dealt with in a low-key manner.

There was the unavoidable criticism from Washington that the hijackers had been promised safe passage. Algerians I talked to, however, pointed out that many lives had been saved and that Algeria could only hold on to its reputation as a fair and trustworthy negotiator if it stuck to its promises, no matter how repugnant those may seem to some. One young official linked the two incidents and asked rhetorically why the US lamented "the escape of Arab terrorists and refused to condemn the Israeli terrorists who had assassinated Abu Jihad." The debate within the United States Administration on whether the Abu Jihad murder could be classified as an act of terrorism and the assertion that Israeli culpability had not been demonstrated struck him - and most others I talked to - as transparent and cynical.

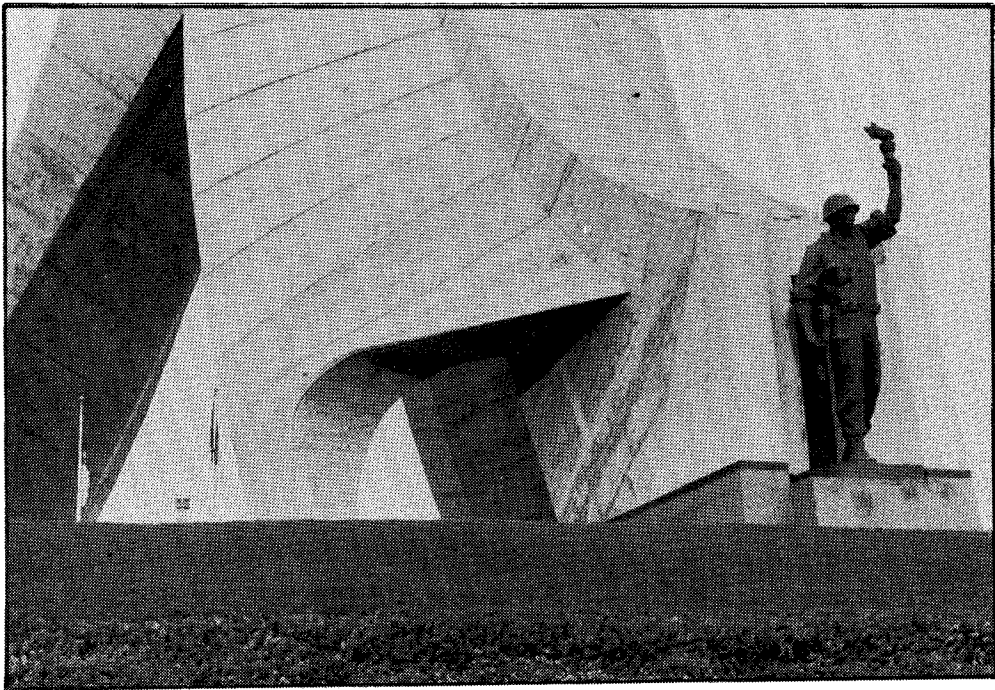
Underlying several officials' short tempers during the hijacking was the feeling that it deflected attention from what is here (and in most other Arab countries) referred to as "the uprising" in the West Bank and



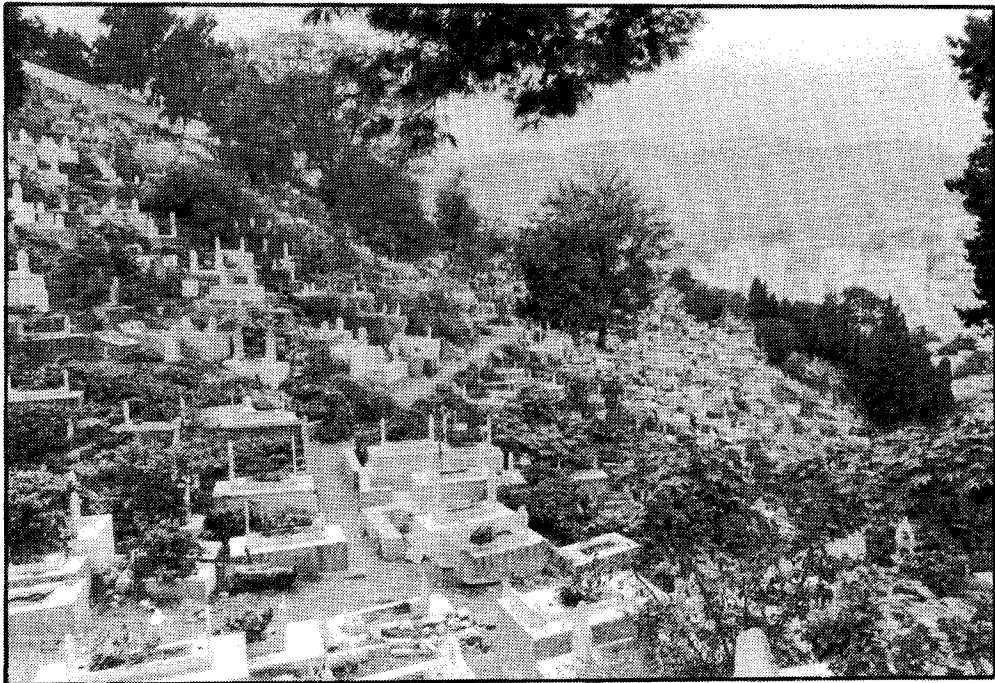
The Kasbah, Algiers.

Gaza. Algeria has traditionally been one of the staunchest supporters of the Palestinian cause; a struggle they often compare to their own revolution against the french. As I write this report the Algerian government is preparing an Arab summit that will deal with the Palestinian revolt. Yasser Arafat already flew in a few days ago to meet with president Benjedid. With the recent signs of rapprochement between different Palestinian factions and Syrian president Assad, and with the galvanizing effect Abu Jihad death's has had among Palestinians, the conference may be a particularly important one. Behind the scenes the Algerians are negotiating intensely to ensure that opposing factions among the Palestinians and within the Arab world will participate.

Outwardly, nothing of this effort is visible. As usual, Algerian officials will not talk about their diplomatic initiatives or offer outspoken opinions about political problems. Similarly, Algerian newspapers and magazines devote a substantial amount of space to Third World issues; but their coverage of news involving either the United States or the Soviet Union consists usually of scrupulously neutral reporting. During President Boumedienne's term in office (1965-1978) the official party's publication, Révolution Africaine, often contained vitriolic outbursts against the United States. Its editorials now are refreshingly candid and unencumbered by rhetoric. They contrast as much to their pro-



Detail of Martyrs' Monument, Algiers.



Partial view of El Ketar cemetery, Algiers.

American Moroccan and Tunisian counterparts as to the virulently anti-US ones still found in Libya's Al-Zahf al-Akhdar.

At a couple of dinner parties to which I was invited - one in an exquisite Ottoman villa in the fashionable Mustapha Supérieur part of Algiers - I had a chance to talk at length to some officials and private entrepreneurs (a relatively new breed!) about the changes the country underwent these last years. What struck me - in contrast to similar informal conversations I had in the other North African countries these last two years - was the guarded optimism and pride displayed by most of the dinner guests. I was often reminded of former US ambassador Richard Parker's statement I reported in a previous report that Algerians often display "a sense of superiority not unlike that of the early Americans" - a feeling created by their victory in the war against France.

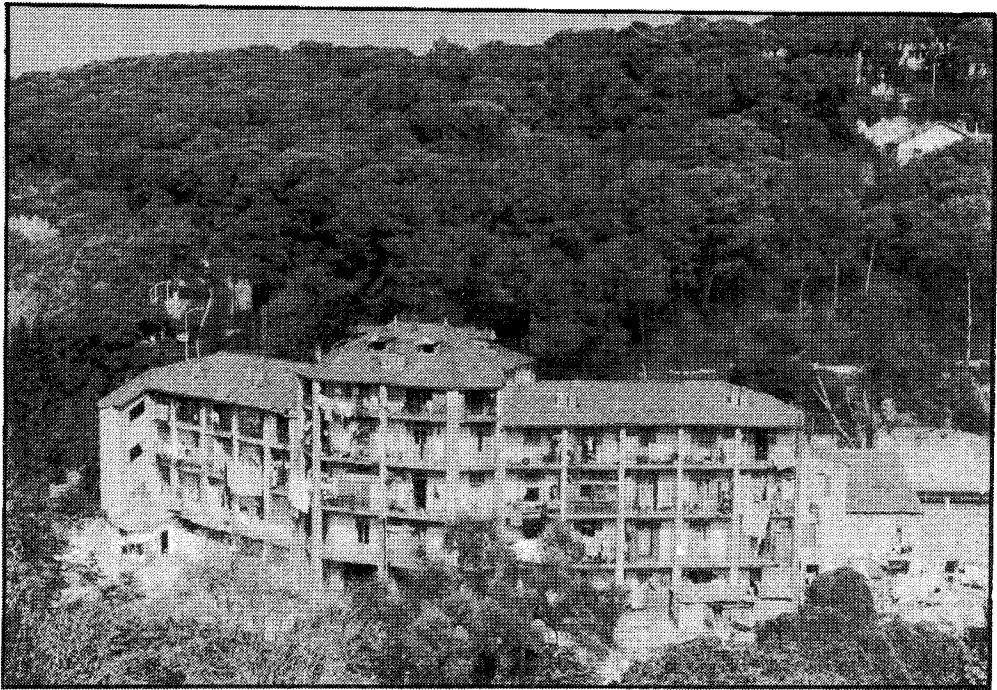
At one of the dinners there was a great debate between pro- and anti-infitah supporters. Infitah, as I briefly mentioned in one of my previous reports refers to the liberalization of Algeria's economy. Although there now seems no way to turn back on the pro-market strategy that was slowly adopted after Boumedienne's death, the controversies remain very much alive and have even increased these last months as more liberalization measures were adopted. The anti-infitah group at the dinner consisted primarily of some technocrats that had been in charge of state companies during the Boumedienne era. Their viewpoint was eloquently expressed by a former SONATRACH [the national oil and natural gas company] employee who argued that the socialist experiment would have succeeded "if only it had been given more time."

The refutation came from a young western-educated businessman who had set up his private consulting office in Algiers - and whose main business incidentally still consists of government contracts. His view was that the state companies had proven so inefficient and the legislation that regulated their functioning so complex that only a complete overhaul held out a promise of turning the Algerian economy around.

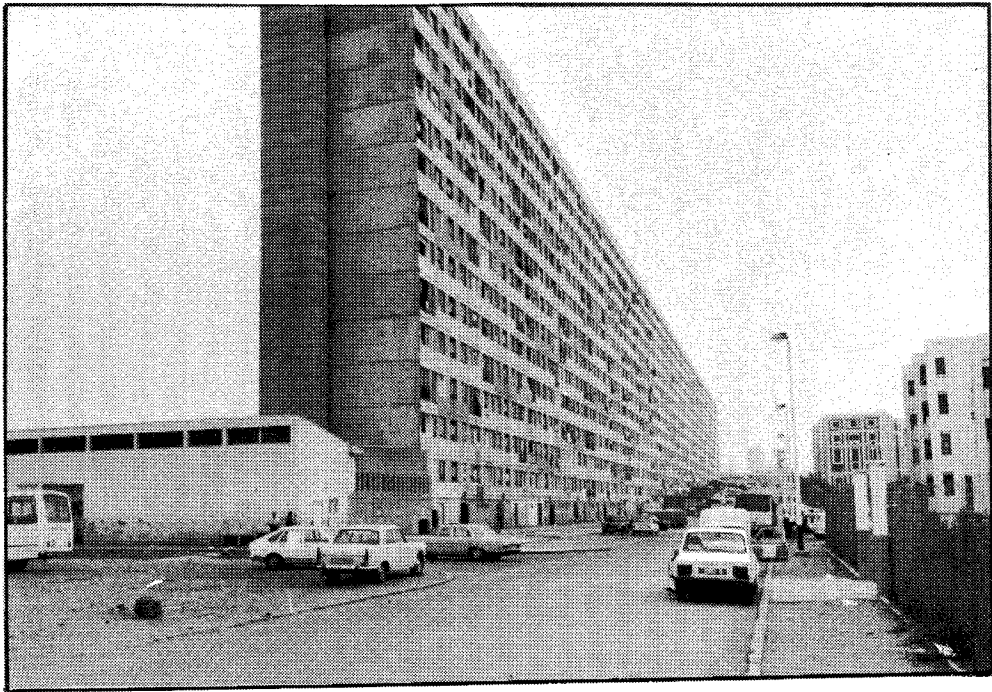
I can only narrate a very simplified version of the debate for each side craftily wove into their argument supporting theories and facts, many of whom I defended or rejected years ago while writing my doctoral dissertation on the subject. The pro-liberalization supporters were somewhat hampered by the fact that some of their 'opponents' had figured quite prominently in the war of independence. As in most other interactions between Algerians of different generations that I have witnessed, there is a rarely challenged unwritten rule of respect for old mujahidin [guerillas or freedom fighters] in this country.

But the informal gatherings were instructive. There was little doubt that the opinions of the pro-infitah faction had carried the day. Although the older men had enjoyed deferential treatment it was clear that they were somehow resigned to what their younger colleagues had defended. The latter had been tactful but determined in putting forward their viewpoints.

The two dinners also provided me with a glimpse into Algerian everyday life. As I described in my previous reports, Algerians are usually judged to be self-effacing if not secretive. Their reserve unnerves many Westerners. The bureaucratic problems and the difficult living conditions in the major cities deter others from coming here: few reporters or



Old French housing near Hydra.



New housing project near Harraj

researchers bother to spend any amount of time in the country. As a result there is still not a single good book written in english on post-independence Algeria.

An academic friend once came for a few days and left almost immediately. The thought that I would spend a few months here seemed unbelievable to him - just as the idea of possibly doing the same in Libya. Of all the countries I have reported from, however, Algeria must by far be my favorite one. After Morocco and Tunisia it is an absolute delight not being accosted at every street corner; during all my time here I was asked for money only once - by a young child whose mother promptly pummeled its bottom.

I asked a good friend here recently why Algeria hasn't bothered to accommodate its tourists better. His answer was at the same time defiant and self-critical: "we never wanted too many and because we are too proud." He is a young engineer who works at a cement plant near the city's northern periphery. Although I met him almost daily for dinner at a small neighborhood restaurant, it took almost a month before he felt comfortable enough to use the familiar french "tu" in talking to me. It took several more weeks before he introduced me to his family.

In The Stranger Albert Camus - and so many other writers before and after him - wrote about the impenetrable stare with which Algerians looked at Europeans. During the war French commanders commented again and again on what one described as "those eyes that reveal no emotion." To them they held a threat that remained unspoken. A few days ago I passed through Bou Saada on my way back from the Sahara desert. Lined up in a long row in the post office, waiting for telephone connections, were a number of men. I was the only foreigner in the building. As I stood waiting for my turn I reflected on how the men around me looked exactly like any group of men photographed during the war: the same turbans, the salt-and-pepper mustaches, the worn European jackets over local pants, the inevitable cigarette and the silence. And always that steady penetrating stare that follows you; eyes that are never averted.

It takes a while to detect curiosity, not hostility, behind those eyes. Some people never get accustomed to it. At Bou Saada, for the first time, I realized that for some time now I had been unaware of the stares.

What continues to fascinate me after all this time is the Algerians' continued preoccupation with the War of Independence. Almost every day El-Moudjahid prints pictures of mujahidin who lost their lives a quarter of a century or more ago. Every little town and hamlet - even those deep in the Sahara, a region that remained almost untouched by the everyday events of the war - has its martyrs' monument. Sometimes while driving through the countryside I encounter old bridges that have been closed off to traffic; usually there is a commemorative plaque for mujahidin that were thrown by the french from the bridge into the river below. In the Soummam valley a humble cottage, where once the country's guerilla leaders gathered in the middle of the war to hammer out a common strategy against the french, has become a national shrine.



Riadh El-Feth, new shopping mall across
from the Martyrs' monument.



Railroad station and harbor, Algiers

A few weeks ago another small article appeared in El-Moudjahid in memory of a young mujahid who had died in 1958 during a razzia in a little town near Tipasa. The article asked all his wartime friends to gather in his memory at the home of his son, exactly thirty years after the shooting. With the help of some friends who called the mayor of the village, I was able to locate the son and asked his permission to visit him. On a sunny friday morning I drove out to Tipasa - its spectacular Roman ruins virtually tumbling into the Mediterranean - and on to the village. The young man was about my age. He listened to my request to write what I thought would be a good newsletter, focused on his father and gathering the recollections of his old friends who would arrive later that afternoon. He showed me some pictures of his father, a strikingly beautiful young man with penetrating eyes below heavy eyebrows. There were more pictures of him in uniform, together with a number of other guerillas.

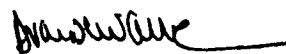
Somehow things didn't work out. His mother - the guerilla's widow - was reluctant to have me around when the other men showed up. I didn't insist; both had already been very generous in sharing their own story. On the way back I stopped at the Tipasa ruins, of which Camus once wrote "Happy is he among the living who has seen such things." But somehow, sitting at the water's edge, my thoughts were not with Camus but with the family I had just left. The widow's story of how her husband had gone out the last night with some sort of premonition of his death brought back to mind some lines from one of Algeria's greatest living poets and writers, Katib Yacine, lines from a poem he provocatively entitled "Terrorists":

Ils allaient dans la nuit
Le coeur serré à la pensée que le pays
les verrait disparaître

And also this, his thought about the absurdity of the War of Independence:

Il y a tant de morts...
Pour si peu de poussière.

All the best,



Received in Hanover 6/3/88