

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Ben Youssef ben Khedda

31, rue Maurice Ripoche  
Paris XIV, France  
February 22, 1962

Mr. Richard Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Ave.  
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

One night in July, 1957, when General Massu's paratroops were in the last stages of crushing rebel terrorism in Algiers, a man of less than average height, bearded and in dark glasses - a Spaniard or a Maltese one would have said - was alerted by his guard. Without a second's hesitation and still in his pajamas, he fled out across terrasses and over rooftops and disappeared. Such was the last departure from Algiers of Ben Youssef ben Khedda, at the time an important terrorist commander and presently the head of the Gouvernement provisoire de la Republique algerienne (GPRA).

While predicting the ultimate successful outcome of negotiations between the de Gaulle government and the GPRA is as hazardous as forecasting a sunny day in this leaden grey Paris of February, it seems more likely than ever that ben Khedda will soon be back in the city of his revolutionary baptism. His return will be less hasty than his departure, and this time he will not have to hide behind false names and disguises. His life will still be in danger from political enemies, but this time he will enjoy the protection of the French security forces, at least for a while. Installed in the modern structure that now houses the Delegate-General instead of improvised hide-outs that had to be changed every few days, ben Khedda's mind will turn to economic plans, administrative problems and foreign policy instead of the placing of bombs in cafés and the creation of new terrorist networks.

For ben Khedda and his associates have ceased to be hors-la-loi; they have even ceased to be some of several "valid interlocutors". They have become the undisputed anti-colonialist leaders in a colony that de Gaulle seems to be on the verge of decolonizing. They will be the chiefs of the Algeria of tomorrow - whether "tomorrow" be tomorrow or next week or even next year.

Ben Youssef ben Khedda was born to a moderately prosperous family in the town of Berrouaghia, just south of Algiers, in 1920. He is thus of the generation which has given the Algerian revolution its most important leaders, the generation following - ideologically as well as chronologically - that of Ferhat Abbas, who with what he represented, was replaced at the head of the movement last August. Whereas Abbas was a bourgeois, a moderate, a man whose habits of mind and political past led him to a faith in parliamentary forms and gradual political reforms,<sup>1</sup> ben Khedda and his contemporaries are young radicals, distrustful of political parties and democracy in the western sense, and firmly convinced that victory in the anti-imperialist revolution is only the first step towards victory in the social revolution.

The very personalities of ben Khedda and Ferhat Abbas reflect the individual and historical divide that separates them. Abbas is typically Mediterranean, just as Bourguiba is. He is expansive, loquacious, flexible, a verbalizer, a reformer, a compromiser. Ben Khedda, on the other hand, is a reincarnation of Malraux' portrait of Michael Borodine in Les Conquerants. He is a dur, a revolutionary by faith. He is always the complete master of himself, a man of amazing physical courage and resistance. He listens rather than speaks and when he does speak every word is weighed. He is an intellectual of Marxist formation for whom cerebral conclusions and concrete actions could not remain separate. This explains the paradoxical image of the bookish ben Khedda directing a bomb-throwing network. This, and his belief in the political wisdom and military efficacy of blind terrorism.

"The crisp shot out of the night which is politics", as Stendhal described it, entered the juvenile universe of ben Khedda at the age of twelve. At the time he was a student at the lycée at Blida and he was already scribbling on the walls in an untutored hand "Republique algerienne" and "Politique algerienne", the slogans of the Etoile nord-africain, the first Algerian nationalist movement. At Blida he was the fellow student of Mohammed Yazid, the present GPRA Minister of Information, of Saad Dahlab, the present Minister of Foreign Affairs, and - of all people - Pierre Lagaille.

Finishing his secondary education, he entered the Universite d'Alger where, like Abbas, he studied pharmacy. Unlike Abbas, who as a student leader over a decade before had ardently defended the myth of assimilation and Franco-Moslem cooperation<sup>2</sup>, ben Khedda immediately gravitated to the most extreme nationalist party of the time, Messali Hadj's Parti populaire algerien. Ben Khedda's move was symptomatic of the times. His student political activity merited him a prison term in 1943, but unperturbed, he continued his activity as a militant directly after his release. Completing his studies, he decided to abandon pharmacy and devote himself completely to politics and political journalism. His considerable abilities as an organizer and theoretician led him, at the age of twenty-six, to the post of secretary general of the Mouvement pour le triomphe des Liberties democratiques (MTLD), the successor to the banned Parti populaire.

During the next eight years he continued as a member of the Mouvement's central committee and as an important writer of party propaganda. Up until 1954 he was not marked out as a particular extremist, nor indeed was the faction of the Mouvement to which he belonged. On the contrary, when his faction broke out into open revolt against the increasingly tyrannical Messali Hadj, the bearded, charismatic father of modern Algerian nationalism, ben Khedda was specifically singled out and berated as a "reformist" for his "willingness to compromise". Ben Khedda's faction was willing, for example, to cooperate politically with the liberal European mayor of Algiers of the time, Jacques Chevalier.

By the summer of 1954, the two opposing wings of the Mouvement had virtually neutralized each other in their internecine quarrels; Algerian nationalism as a organized force was practically paralyzed. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, an appeal sounded, an appeal for unity and armed insurrection. Its framers, for the most part scarcely known on the political scene in Algiers, were former members of the underground wing of the MTLD. In the face of the party's paralysis they were

resolved to move forward at all costs. The means they chose were direct military action; their goal was to destroy the system rather than to work for reform from within it. During the summer of 1954 this group, directed by nine men now known as the rebellion's chefs historiques and including such figures as Ahmed ben Bella and Belkacem Krim<sup>5</sup>, was busy training guerrilla bands, stealing and storing arms, and searching for support in the independent Arab states. By early fall, ready or not, the group had fixed a date for the déclenchement of the revolution. At midnight on November first - it was All Saints' Day - seventy simultaneous attacks on French posts in widely scattered parts of Algeria announced in blood the birth of a war now in its eighth year.

The French authorities were astounded; they had expected nothing of the kind. Nor, however, had most of Algeria's Moslem politicians. Ben Khedda's wing of the MTLD had gotten wind of what was afoot, but viewed the resort to armed insurrection with the gravest misgivings. In the mind of the future GPRA prime minister, the revolt was premature, ill-planned, and destined to failure.

Having next to no idea who the organizers of the revolt were, the French Administration struck blindly. Moslem politicians and leaders were arrested who were as ignorant of the revolt's nature as they were innocent of participation in it. For the second time ben Khedda was put behind bars. Proof that he was not implicated in the uprising, indeed that he disapproved of its basic suppositions, can be adduced from two editorials in Alger Republicain which appeared above his name shortly before his arrest. In the first of these he wrote:

The MTLD is for the establishment of a democratic and social Algerian republic. All Algerians, regardless of race have a right and are in duty bound to take part in this endeavor...In addition, the MTLD believes that the struggle for immediate demands is not incompatible with the struggle for freedom.

Some one backing the nascent FLN could never have written the last, reformist sentence in the above. A little later, on November 25, the day of his arrest, ben Khedda complained in the columns of the same paper against the repression, but at the same time asserted the need for "future peace and harmony between the two communities that must necessarily live together". Thus, in the early stages at least, ben Khedda was by no means a disciple of direct action. In April, 1955 he was released from prison, probably due to the influence of former European associates in Algiers.

Prison or the crumbling of the middle ground in Algerian politics, or probably a combination of the two, drove ben Khedda to the FLN. Soon after his release, in the spring and summer of 1955, he was in close contact with Belkacem Krim and other guerrilla leaders. His first responsibility for the revolutionary organization was the implementation of FLN cells in the city of Algiers. These cells had three basic functions. First, they were charged with collecting funds, either by appeal to nationalist enthusiasm or by the threat of assassination. Secondly, they were organized to develop the political consciousness of the masses and to channel this into blind loyalty to the FLN. Finally, they were to

spread terrorism, sometimes blind, sometimes not, to increase tension and insecurity, to demonstrate to the Moslem population the impotency of the French, and to draw French Army units from the bled in order to give the FLN field units a little breathing space.

Ben Khedda's abilities as a political and terrorist organizer soon brought him to a level of equality with the original founders of the revolution. This new status was officially recognized at a congress of rebel leaders actually in Algeria held in an abandoned forestry station in the Soumman Valley - a zone declared pacified by the French military authorities - in August, 1956. This congress elected an executive committee of five members which represented the very nucleus of power within the FLN for the next two years. Though theoretically responsible to the Conseil national de la Revolution algerienne (CNRA), which acts as the FLN's parliament, this committee was in fact sovereign because of its ability to perpetuate itself by co-option, and because of the physical difficulty the cumbersome CNRA had in meeting. Along with Krim, Saad Dahlab and two other FLN leaders since killed, ben Khedda was a member of this committee for slightly over a year.

As a result of the congress at Soumman, ben Khedda became the FLN's politico-military chief for the autonomous zone of Algiers, one of the six rebel military districts and at the time the most active. In such a position ben Khedda was a tracked man, menaced at every minute by death likely to be preceded by torture. Only a man of steel could have led this life. And only a man who believed more in the morality of ends than that of means could have organized the placing of innumerable time bombs in stadiums and street cars and other public places where sheer chance selected the inevitable victims. For ben Khedda believed that blind terrorism was one of the most effective weapons in the FLN arsenal. For this reason, his condemnation of the Organisation de l'Armee secrete sounds a little like an Inquisition priest reading Corinthians 11, 13.

One interesting and little known phase of ben Khedda's career as FLN chief in Algiers is his contact during this period with the communists. Early in 1956, when it seemed that peace negotiations with the French were on the point of starting, the Parti communiste algerien (PCA) was searching desperately for a means to become a part of the revolution and thus become a "valid interlocutor"; that is, to have a voice in the peace talks and thus take a decisive part in determining Algeria's future. Until May, 1956 the FLN refused all contact with the communists. By this time, however, the rebels needed all the help they could possibly get and were anxious to see how the PCA might be useful...or simply used. The party chief, Dr. Saddock Hadjerès, an indigenous Jew, proposed in secret negotiations with FLN representatives that their organization, already including several groups, be enlarged to include the PCA. Ben Khedda, who was instrumental in conducting these negotiations, not only rejected the common front idea, but even maintained that membership in the PCA was incompatible with membership in the FLN. By July, 1956, however after the PCA had turned over to the FLN an important shipment of stolen arms and the use of its explosives laboratories, ben Khedda's position softened. While still refusing the common front idea, he permitted individual communists to join the FLN. For propaganda reasons, Dr. Hadjerès was extremely anxious to publish this accord which would show the Algerian masses that the PCA had at least something to do with the revolt. Ben Khedda, however, refused, and when Hadjerès went ahead anyhow, the FLN flatly denied the authenticity of the accord, even going so far

as to assert that the FLN had never received any aid whatsoever from the communists. Since this time relations between the PCA and the FLN have remained extremely cool.

<sup>asserted</sup> This incident is instructive, especially since it has been so glibly in the French press that the GPRA chief is in fact a crypto-communist. Ben Khedda is certainly no communist, but as these events show he has been willing to use the party to his own ends. Ben Khedda is a man of principle, but his principles do not include that of fair play. What he has fought for with so much energy, courage and ruthlessness is an independent and socially modernized Algeria. He has employed everything to serve these goals. If, on a trip to Red China, he showed himself enthusiastic about what he saw, this by no means meant that he was a communist. It meant more than anything else that at the time - when substantial Chinese aid to the rebels seemed imminent - it was useful for ben Khedda to appear enthusiastic.

But if ben Khedda is no communist, he certainly is a progressiste, a Young Turk strongly influenced by socialist ideals and Marxist molds of thought. Already at the Soumman Congress in 1956 he represented this tendency within the FLN, and he has not ceased to represent it since. Indeed, the ups and downs of his career since then are closely linked to this fact.

In September, 1957 the Conseil national de la Revolution algerienne, assembled in Tripoli, Libya, heard him defend the theses according to which the FLN should devote more attention to the mobilization and organization of the peasant and urban masses, that the precise social goals of the revolution should be stated and stressed, and that the FLN should adopt and declare a policy of neutralism in international affairs. From this leftist line ben Khedda has not since varied. However, at the time the CNRA was not prepared to accept such radical views, partly due to the domination of more conservative elements, but also partly because the CNRA leaders, believing negotiations to be in sight, were hesitant to arouse further French distrust. As a result, ben Khedda (along with Saad Dahlab, one of the chief negotiators in the present talks) ~~was~~ replaced on the CNRA's executive committee by Ferhat Abbas, the debater, the moderate, the man most likely to succeed at the negotiating table.

For the next four years ben Khedda's progressiste faction of the FLN was in the minority, and ben Khedda himself was without positions of particular importance. In the first provisional government, established in September, 1958 and headed by Abbas, ben Khedda had to settle for the minor portfolio of social affairs. It was in this capacity that he was the official guest of Mao Tse-tung. At the third session of the CNRA, held in 1959, ben Khedda again defended his progressiste positions and again found himself in the minority. This time he even lost his ministerial post and was relegated to that of roving ambassador for the GPRA. As such he visited Yugoslavia, came to New York to defend the FLN's brief before the United Nations, and made a propaganda tour of Latin America where he was unpleasantly impressed by the prevalence of "United States neo-imperialism".

Finally, at the CNRA meeting held à huis clos last August in Tripoli, ben Khedda again defended the views to which he has so tenaciously stuck. During the year that had just elapsed three open attempts at negotiation

with France had proved futile, and the Abbas ministry had inevitably lost prestige with the CNRA. This, linked with the general radicalization of the FLN - which, like most revolutionary movements has tended to go left as the violence has gone on - brought the CNRA around to supporting ben Khedda's positions and ben Khedda personally. Abbas and his close political allies resigned, and ben Khedda, with the powerful support of Krim, rose to the primiership.

The communiqué of the Tripoli session, despite its vagueness and lack of details, shows clearly the ideas that ben Khedda has expressed ever since his entry into the FLN. Though fogged up in the jargon of official communiqués, the following two points of the text distributed immediately after the meeting plainly show this:

On the exterior, decisions have been taken to extend the action of the Algerian revolution, which manifest themselves in a policy of non-alignment.

The CNRA has specified the social and democratic content of the Algerian people's struggle. Its aspirations tend towards the construction of a modern nation, (and) an economy at the service of the people.

The same attitude is reflected in the message ben Khedda sent to Chou En-lai just last week. "We fully realize," he wrote, "the difficulties and the size of the struggle that remains for us against the forces of neo-colonialism and imperialism and for the consolidation of our independence and our economic and social liberty."

How the leftism of ben Khedda and his political allies will translate itself into concrete acts of course remains to be seen. But it would be surprising if the Algeria to which ben Khedda will return one of these days does not eventually assume a political complexion more like that of Egypt or Ghana than like that of Nigeria or Cote d'Ivoire.

Sincerely, *Richard Mathews*  
Richard Mathews

NOTES

- 1.-It should be borne in mind that he did not join the FLN until 1956 when there was absolutely no other place for a man of his ambitions on the Algerian political scene. Also, according to some French sources, he came over to the FLN only after the Front had assassinated his nephew and threatened his own life.
- 2.-In 1933 Abbas published an article of which the following is an extract:

If I had encountered the Algerian nation I would be a nationalist and, as such, would have nothing to be ashamed of. Men who have died for a patriotic ideal are honored and respected every day. My life is worth no more than theirs. And yet I will not die for the Algerian fatherland, for this fatherland does not exist. I have not encountered it. I have questioned history; I have questioned the quick and the dead. I have visited cemeteries. No one has spoken to me of such a thing...You cannot build on wind. We have eliminated all fogginess and vain imaginings to link our future once and for all with that of French endeavor in this country.

If these <sup>words</sup> are a source of embarrassment to Abbas now, they did not seem out of place when he wrote them.
- 3.-The others were Mohammed Khider, Hocine Ait Ahmed, and Mohammed Boudiaf, all captured when their plane, belonging to a Moroccan civil airline, was pirated out of the Mediterranean sky by a masterful French trick on October 22, 1956. Another member, Rabah Bidat, was captured in 1955 and is still alive today despite several suicide attempts while undergoing torture at the hands of the French paras. These four men, along with ben Bella, are presently held in France. Three other chefs historiques were killed in action, one by the treachery of his own men.