

Abu Mayzar, Muhammad. Interviewed 2011. Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*, 2016.¹

There were multiple arenas in which we were active in Algeria. For instance, in the immediate years following independence, the country was a centre that attracted all Afro-Asian liberation movements and all the free peoples of the world. As Palestinians, we established relations with various liberation movements there. From Algeria, the first Palestinian delegation, comprised of brothers Abu Ammar and Abu Jihad, travelled to China. In Algeria, the first meeting with the Cuban revolution took place. This was in 1964, even before Fateh launched its first military operation. There was a Tricontinental conference in Algiers, which was held at a site known as the Club des Pins (which was by the way one of the most notable buildings that were constructed in the early independence era in Algiers)...At any rate, one of the leaders who had attended the conference was Che Guevara, who was representing the Cuban revolution. The first meeting with him took place at the Aletti hotel. It was attended by Abu Jihad, myself, and one of the Tunisian brothers who was translating from French to Arabic and vice-versa. This was the first Palestinian-Cuban meeting, taking place in 1964 through Guevara. The Cubans have historically marked and acknowledge this fact. One of its effects was that many years later, when the Palestinian-Cuban Friendship Association was formed, I was selected as its first chairman... Through Algeria, several interactions took place with liberation movements: the Vietnamese, the Chinese, the African movements. It was a meeting place. Algeria also hosted one of the most important institutions: the Cherchell Military Academy, in which many Palestinians were enrolled...

Until that time Fateh had not fired its first shot. However, through Algeria, it made various connections with the Moroccans, the Tunisians, the Africans, the Vietnamese, the Chinese, South East Asia, Latin America, and Cuba. These were not minor relationships; they were extremely precious and valuable. Additionally, relations started to develop with some progressive French forces as well as Arab figures in France that used to support Algeria, including the progressive leftist currents such as the Trotskyist and Maoist ones. Some of them even had members that were advisors to Ben Bella. For instance Lutfallah Suleiman, an Egyptian that had an established line within the international Trotskyist movement, was one of Ben Bella's advisors, and

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² The interviewee here is in fact referring to the Second Economic Seminar of Afro-Asian Solidarity, which was addressed by Che Guevara on February 24, 1965.

so was Pablo the Greek.³ At some point, even Gerard Chaliand had relations with the Algerians. In other words, various leftist groups had connections with members of the FLN politburo such as Mohammad Harbi, Hussein Zahwan, Aziz Zardani, and others. There was an intersecting web of relations that we began to access.

As for the Cherchell Military Academy, it was formed in the earliest days of independence. It was headed by Saleh al-Yahyawi, who was its first commander. Several training courses were held there for Palestinians. I still retain all the names of the cadres that were enrolled in the courses in 1965, 1966, and 1967. And when the Palestinian revolution was launched in 1 January 1965, as far as I can recall, the first public official support came from Algeria. Of course, reports of the earliest operations were published in the unofficial Lebanese papers. However, the first page of *Al-Moudjahid* in the first week of January focused on the Palestinian revolution. I remember very well the headline of the lead article: "The Revolutionaries of the 1st of November Salute the Revolutionaries of the 1st of January". The author of this major piece was Lemnaouer Marouch. This was support that was received from an official Algerian paper, and it continued. Various fears had been expressed at an earlier stage. When I first went to Algeria, some friends were opposed to the idea of launching the Palestinian revolution. However, after the revolution began, they all changed their minds. They still had their concerns around the issue of sustainability. However, thankfully, they were with us and continued to be with us...

As I mentioned before, Abu Jihad paid attention to Palestinian work in Algeria; not only was he concerned with political work, but he also concentrated on the Palestinians themselves. When he arrived in Algeria, there were only 14 Palestinians. By the time he had left, there were thousands there, working as teachers or enrolled as students. Following the launch of the Palestinian revolution on 1 January, 1965, Abu Jihad left Algeria and went to the revolutionary headquarters in Damascus. This took place in March 1965. I remained and became responsible for the Palestine Office and for Fateh. In those days, and even before Fateh's launch of the revolution, there was a dualism. The PLO had been established, and its chairman Al-Shuqeiri wanted Palestinian representation in Algiers to be held by the PLO. What was present on the ground was Fateh representation. In order to resolve this, we handed the Palestine Office keys to Al-Shuqeiri's representative Dr Rifat Oudeh and we established a separate office for Fateh in a different location. This

³ This is a reference to the leading Greek Trotskyist Michalis Raptis (1911-1996), who was better known by his pseudonym Michel Pablo.

continued until Fateh assumed control over the PLO, ending the dualism in 1969...

Just before the 1967 war, Algiers hosted the first conference of Arab socialists, progressives, and nationalists. The conference took place in May under the patronage of President Boumediene and it was presided over by Abdel Aziz Boutaflia, his foreign minister at the time. Fateh was represented in the conference by Farouq al-Qadoumi and myself. Two other Palestinians, Shafiq al-Hout and Naji Alloush, also attended. The former represented the PLO, while the latter came in his capacity as a Palestinian intellectual. But Farouq came as a Fateh man, and he stayed in my house. That is where he wrote the pamphlet *The Liberation of Occupied Countries*, which was added to a list of booklets produced on revolutionary experiences. A few days later Farouq left to Spain and the 1967 war erupted. In coordination with the Algerian Joint Forces Command we opened a training camp for Palestinians outside the framework of Cherchell, and a large number of Palestinian volunteers came from Europe, the Arab *Maghreb*, and even from the USA. Some of them went on operations, got arrested, and were eventually released. Some of them became symbols, including Mahmoud al-Hamshari, Ghazi al-Husseini, al-Manasrah, and Abdullah Franji. These were students. They came to me in Algeria, trained in the camp, and they went on to carry out operations. The camp played a central role and it was under my direct supervision. It continued to exist until Abdel Nasser resigned and the repercussions of the war were felt. In this period, Arab and Palestinian work was thrown into confusion. Egypt was defeated, Syria was defeated, Abdel Nasser resigned and then returned, and *fidai* work was halted as a whole. What happened at the time? A Syrian presidential plane arrived in Algiers. Aboard were three senior officials: Nureddin al-Attasi (the President), Ibrahim Makhous (the Foreign Minister), and Mohammad Ibrahim al-Ali (Commander of the Syrian Popular Army, holding the rank of Minister). All of them were friends from my pre-Fateh days and I met them when they arrived to Algeria even before they met President Houari Boumediene himself. When they briefed him, they were unfortunately in a collapsed state, utterly devastated. I remember President Nureddin al-Attasi smoking his cigarette as if he was not present. He was totally absent-minded, saying: "O Mohammad, there is iron at the bottom, and iron on top, and Syrian flesh in the middle. Nothing is possible, there is total collapse!" During that visit, the first official meeting took place between me and Muhammad Ibrahim al-Ali in his capacity as the Commander of the Popular Army. And then there was a meeting between us and the Algerians. Through this meeting, we secured the first weapons shipment from Algeria to Fateh. The delivery was to be facilitated by

Mohammad Ibrahim al-Ali; the first plane flew from Algiers loaded with weapons for Fateh but delivered in his name.

This was the first weapons deal, but it should also be remembered that in the days of Boumediene in 1966, the first official financial support was provided by the Algerian government to Fateh. The support was not given to the PLO, but to Fateh. I was there at the time, and a decree was issued to hand an Algerian Diplomatic Passport to Mohammad Abu-Meizar so as to ease any transfer issues. There was support in every realm: military help, provision of weapons, financing. With regards to monetary support, the amount given was not substantial but its symbolic value was enormous. I remember that when I received the money from the Algerian Foreign Ministry, it was handed cash in Pound Sterling. I kept it in my house. A few days later, Farouq al-Qaddumi and Salah al-Din Khalaf (Abu Iyad) came to Algiers and they stayed at my house. Amongst the issues I briefed them on that night was the amount, which was 5 million French Francs. They asked me: "Where are you keeping the money?" and I said "here at the house". The following morning, the two, who had been sharing the same bedroom, said: "You know Mohammad, you deprived us of sleep last night. No one in their right mind would keep 5 million Francs cash at their house. Thieves could kill you for that kind of money. We have decided the following: You will take the 5 million Francs and travel to Geneva. You will open a special account there and deposit the amount." So I answered: "You are worried that I would be killed because I have 5 million Francs and want me to go to Geneva to deposit them in a special account there! Do you know how much the 5 million Francs are worth? They amount to £3,500". "That's all!" they exclaimed. And I answered back "Yes, that's all." The Algerians used to count money with the old francs (*anciens francs*) not the new ones. Even now, the Algerians and Moroccans count with centimes rather than the new franc. So when Farouq and Salah learnt that the amount was only £3500, this was an unpleasant surprise to them. At any rate, there was no need to go to Geneva and they took the amount and flew back to Damascus! However, as modest as it was, this was the first financial support given to us in an official state capacity, and it was therefore symbolically important. Likewise, Algeria was the first to give us military aid, be it in terms of training or arming. It was also the first to support us with passports, and the first to help us establish relations outside the Arab world...