

## Massacres of May 8th, 1945 in Algeria from the Writings of Abou El Kacem Saâdallah (The Algerian National Movement Vol. 3)

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### Abstract:

This article delves into a significant chapter of contemporary Algerian history, marking a transformative moment that profoundly altered the political landscape. It underscores the ineffectiveness of political involvement and exposes the duplicity of French assurances. We explore these themes through the insights of Abou El Kacem Saâdallah, a seminal figure in modern Algerian historiography.

Our study retraces the historical underpinnings of the May 8th, 1945 massacres in Algeria, examining their principal triggers and underlying motivations. We recount the sequence of events and their aftermath, offering an analysis of divergent viewpoints on the causative factors and attributions of responsibility for the massacres. Moreover, leveraging the writings of Abou El Kacem Saâdallah, we engage in a thorough discussion regarding the variance in the reported number of victims and the rationale behind these discrepancies.

**Keywords:** Algeria, massacres, Abu al-QasimSaadallah, Events 8May 1945.

### Introduction:

The May 8th, 1945 massacres stand as a pivotal and somber milestone in the modern history of Algeria and its national movement. This event, which garnered widespread international attention and sorrow, ignited a spectrum of opinions concerning its victims, instigating factors, motives, objectives, and consequences. This discourse introduces the contributions of Abou El KacemSaâdallah, an esteemed Algerian historian who not only witnessed but also extensively studied these events, epitomizing the Algerian historical narrative.

Abou El KacemSaâdallahwas notable for formulating multiple hypotheses and providing a detailed account of the incident without adjudicating the events, thereby inviting further inquiry and contemplation. How did Abou El KacemSaâdallaharticulate his perspective on the May 8th, 1945 massacres?

Professor Abou El KacemSaâdallah commenced his investigation by posing two critical inquiries:

- Was the May 8th, 1945 event a thwarted revolution?
- Was it a calculated massacre executed by the French against the Algerians?

### 1 - Precursors and Roots of the Incident:<sup>1</sup>

- The genesis of this pivotal event can be traced to the formation of the "Friends of Manifesto and Freedom" movement in March 1944. General "Catroux" responded to the unveiling of its manifesto by asserting that this burgeoning storm must be quelled, highlighting the escalating consciousness within the Algerian national movement.

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<sup>1</sup>Abou El KacemSaâdallah, *The Algerian National Movement, 1930-1945, Vol. 3*, Dar Al-Gharb Al-Islami, Beirut, 4th edition, 1992, pp. 227, 233.

- The subsequent surge in propaganda, protests, and pamphleteering aimed to mold public opinion and stimulate support for the manifesto's demands and more. These demands included dismantling the hybrid municipal framework, terminating military governance in the south, establishing Arabic as the official language, and advocating for the release of Messali... among others.
- The economic crisis in France added fuel to the nationalistic fervor.
- The founding of the Arab League coinciding with the convening of the "Friends of Manifesto and Freedom" conference indirectly encouraged activists to move forward in achieving the specific demands of the Algerian people for freedom and independence, stirring Algerian sentiments and expectations for material and moral support.<sup>2</sup>
- Since February 1945, posters appeared on walls suggesting that the Algerian people's dignity could only be realized within an Algerian entity and government.
- Boycotting elections as the only means to thwart French maneuvers.
- Posters in the spring of 1942 called for armament in response to new developments, coinciding with the arrival of Algerian conscripts.
- Writings on the walls all hinted at a revolution, including phrases like "Algerians, fight for your freedom... the mountains are calling you, the hour of liberation has come<sup>3</sup>," amidst a tense atmosphere between Algerians and the French.
- Boycotts began in schools, cafes, and domestic work, severing all dealings with the French. These conditions and manifestations indicate the strength of the national movement, which took a new turn since the birth of the "Friends of Manifesto and Freedom," and the national consciousness spread despite French oppressive policies, rendering France incapable of stopping it or confronting it except with some provocations like imprisoning Messali El Haj and not releasing him despite demands.

**Factors that aided the Algerians included:**

- Despair of France's readiness to meet their demands.
- Awareness from the Islamic conference in 1936, which was further expanded by the war and economic and political crises.
- France's political and military weakness under the allies and the Germans.
- World War II propaganda and the Atlantic Charter inspired peoples to aspire for their independence and freedom.

**2 - Events and Their Course: What Happened?<sup>4</sup>**

The critical unfolding of events stemmed from a pact among prominent Algerian leaders Abbas, Messali, and Al-Ibrahimi to stage a public demonstration coinciding with the allies' celebration of victory. This was intended to assert pressure on France while showcasing the robustness of the national movement and the

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<sup>2</sup>Ismail Sama'i, *The May 8, 1945 Uprising in Guelma and Its Regions*, Dar Al-Huda, Guelma, 2004, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup>Mohamed Harbi, *The National Liberation Front: Myth and Reality*, trans. Kamil Caesar Dahil, Algeria, 1962, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup>Abou El Kacem Saâdallah, *op. cit.*, pp. 233, 235.

Algerian populace's cognizance of their aspirations. However, the demonstrations escalated beyond their original intent into chaos, exacerbated by the allies' postponed announcement of the celebration day.<sup>5</sup>

On May 1st, 1945, cities across Algeria witnessed demonstrations, predominantly peaceful and orchestrated by the People's Party. <sup>6</sup>The official commencement of festivities on May 7th, 1945, marked by the allies declaring the war's end, saw settlers partaking in exuberant celebrations.

Concurrently, Algerians rallied with chants advocating for freedom, Algerian independence, and the liberation of Messali El Haj. Reports indicate incidents where the French flag was torn, and pamphlets advocating unity for triumph were distributed.

The following day, May 8th, 1945, a market day, witnessed the eruption of violence, particularly notable in Setif and subsequently spreading to both proximate and remote cities. During the Setif demonstrations, attended by 7,000 to 8,000 Algerians, fervent cries for a "Long live a free and independent Algeria" resonated.

Tragically, the peaceful march turned violent when shots were fired at a young scout carrying the Algerian flag as demonstrators reached the city center. This act ignited widespread chaos. While one group proceeded to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, another group clashed with the French settlers they encountered.

### **Who Fired First?<sup>7</sup>**

Abou El Kacem Saâdallah scrutinizes the pivotal question of who initiated the gunfire. Although opinions vary, it is corroborated that the first shot targeted the bearer of the Algerian flag, catalyzing the subsequent turmoil and the demonstrations' descent into disorder. A contemporary mujahid of the event, Sharaga Issa, recounts initially holding the flag before it was seized by Bouzid Saal, an action that triggered a police officer to shoot, marking the commencement of the fatalities.<sup>8</sup>

The intensity of demonstrations varied across the national territory, with notably less violence outside Setif, Guelma, and Kherrata and their environs. Setif's significance as the birthplace of Abbas and Al-Ibrahimi and the origin of the "Friends of Manifesto and Freedom" movement, coupled with Constantine's role as a pivotal hub for the elite, positioned it as a central conduit and crossroad among these influential regions.

Saâdallah contends that although the events could have concluded there, France exploited the situation, creating a pretext for vengeful repression. The response, both brutal and disproportionate, saw the deployment of military forces, police, and gendarmerie, involving settlers from diverse political backgrounds in the suppression efforts.

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<sup>5</sup>See also: Ahmida Amiraoui, *Lectures on Modern Algerian History*, Dar Al-Huda, Algeria, 1st edition, 2004, p. 148.

<sup>6</sup>Ahmed Mehsas, *The Revolutionary Movement in Algeria 1944-1954*, Dar Al-Ma'arifa, Algeria, 2007, p. 237.

<sup>7</sup>Abou El Kacem Saâdallah, *op. cit.*, pp. 235, 238.

<sup>8</sup>Blanch Jean Louis, *Setif 1945: Prelude to a Massacre*, Dar Al-Qasba for Publishing, Algeria, date not mentioned, p. 212.

### 3- French Criminal Acts:<sup>9</sup>

- The French used sweeping operations, leaving no house on their path unsearched and destroyed.
- A large number of aircraft were used to bomb Algerian civilians, with pilots flying 300 missions in one day alone, leveling numerous villages and hamlets and crushing the inhabitants fleeing their homes.<sup>10</sup>
- France deployed tanks that entered homes, killing, wreaking havoc, violating sanctities, and assaulting under the pretext of searching for revolutionaries and weapons.

Despite the initially peaceful nature of the demonstrations, intended to express joy over the victory against Nazism, the French colonial administration turned them into bloody massacres when they fired on Algerians without mercy or distinction. Additionally, previous members from Alsace and Lorraine were brought in to participate in these operations.<sup>11</sup>

### 4- Reports on the Number of Victims:<sup>12</sup>

- The French Interior Minister, Mr. "Texier," stated that 500,000 Algerians participated, which is 5% of the population, resulting in 88 French deaths and 150 injuries. On the Algerian side, approximately 1,200 to 1,500 were killed, and 2,400 were detained, 517 of whom were released while the rest were prosecuted.
- Algerian estimates range from 45,000 to 100,000 killed.
- Foreign estimates also vary, with some approaching the French count and others closer to the Algerian figures, mostly ranging from 50,000 to 70,000 killed.
- Commentators agree that the world knew little about the May 8, 1945, incident because the French used decisive, swift, and strong measures.
- Other repressive measures included the French authorities dissolving the "Friends of Manifesto and Freedom" party, declaring a state of emergency, and arresting its leaders Farhat Abbas, Dr. Saadan, Bashir Al-Ibrahimi, and tens of thousands of men from the national movement.
- Chedli El Mekki described the events of May 8, 1945, as a massacre against the Algerian people, where democratic freedoms were restricted, militias were formed, a state of emergency was declared, and exceptional rulings were issued.<sup>13</sup>
- After the general amnesty on March 16, 1946, they were released, and political life gradually returned to Algeria.

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<sup>9</sup>Abou El Kacem Saâdallah, *op. cit.*, pp. 238, 239.

<sup>10</sup>Sadoun Bachir, "The May 8, 1945 Massacres: Background and Reflections," *Al-Hikma Journal of Historical Studies*, Volume 1, Issue 2, June 2013, p. 201.

<sup>11</sup>Yehia Bouaziz, *Colonial Oppression Policy and the Algerian National Movement*, University Publications Board, Algeria, 1999, pp. 113, 114.

<sup>12</sup>Abou El Kacem Saâdallah, *op. cit.*, pp. 239, 240.

<sup>13</sup>Wahiba Bechrir, Lakhdar Halis, "The Events of May 8, 1945: A Historical and Legal Study," *Academic Journal for Legal and Political Research*, Amar Thelidji University of Laghouat, Algeria, Volume 6, Issue 1, p. 131.

- However, the gap between the Algerian and French sides widened due to the events of May 8, 1945, deepening the wound and pain, thus paving the way for the Algerians to launch the revolution on November 1, 1954.<sup>14</sup>

#### 5- Causes and Motives of the Incident According to France:<sup>15</sup>

- **Economic reasons:** France characterized the unrest as a food riot driven by economic distress due to a shortage of food supplies, with the government announcing plans to dispatch food aid to Algeria. <sup>16</sup>This explanation, however, seems inconsistent with the conditions on the ground. The regions affected were among Algeria's wealthiest, and the demonstrators notably did not target food stores. Moreover, the banners raised by the Algerians lacked any reference to famine or economic hardship, instead, they carried purely political slogans.
- **Political Reasons:** The fervor of the demonstrations was not merely economic but predominantly political, fueled by the Algerian demands for rights and sovereignty. The revolutionary zeal was further stoked by Farhat Abbas, who was accused of heating up the atmosphere by advocating for sacrifices towards independence.
- **Religious and Racial Reasons:** From a French perspective, the Algerians were perceived as resentful and antagonistic toward the French, influenced by religious fervor and simplistic political understanding, readily mobilizing for Jihad at a moment's notice. The broader context of World War II was believed to have intensified anti-foreigner sentiments. The May 8, 1945, events were seen as having a revolutionary Islamic character, with French interpretations linking the unrest in Algeria with concurrent events in Palestine, thereby adding a racial dimension to the interpretation.

#### 6 - French Justifications for the Incidents:<sup>17</sup>

Instead of confronting the true catalysts, French narratives often diverted blame to foreign influences. Some authors suggested German or fascist involvement, while others pointed to the burgeoning concept of Arab nationalism, highlighted by the formation of the Arab League. There were even insinuations pointing to the Allies, particularly the Americans, as instigators.

Official French documentation persistently alluded to German orchestration behind the incidents. Bashir Al-Ibrahim robustly refuted these claims, arguing that the involvement of external forces like fascism or Nazism was negligible, if not entirely absent.<sup>18</sup> These allegations were likely attempts to deflect from

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<sup>14</sup>FouziaBoussabak, "ChedliMekki and the Events of May 8, 1945," *Al-Dhakira Magazine*, Issue 2, 1995, p. 109.

<sup>15</sup>Abou El KacemSaâdallah, *op. cit.*, pp. 240, 243.

<sup>16</sup>Ali Tablet, "Crimes of Colonialism in Algeria, The Massacres of May 8, 1945," *Al-Dhakira Magazine*, Issue 2, 1995, p. 75.

<sup>17</sup>Abou El KacemSaâdallah, *op. cit.*, pp. 244, 247.

<sup>18</sup>WahibaBechrir, LakhdarHalis, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

acknowledging the national movement's escalating force and influence. Confronted with either yielding to demands or responding with repression, the French chose the latter path of violence and terror.

### **7 - Responsibility for the Incidents:<sup>19</sup>**

#### **• Responsibility of the French Administration:**

The inflexibility and the outdated approach of French policies contributed significantly to the crisis. Ignoring advice from some of their own leaders and the pressures from Algerians and their international allies to proactively manage the rising tensions proved detrimental. The administration's reliance on the adage that "Arabs only respect force" was outdated, failing to recognize the evolution from 19th-century to 20th-century Algeria.

Post-World War II, the demands had shifted from equality to independence. From May 1st, the French administration shed any pretense of passivity, taking aggressive measures to suppress the nationalist activities, including dissolving the "Friends of Manifesto and Freedom" party and arresting many activists, thus starkly revealing their oppressive intent.

#### **• Responsibility of the Settlers:**

Farhat Abbas and Bashir Al-Ibrahim pointed directly at the settlers for orchestrating the May 8, 1945, massacre, particularly egregious in Constantine with violent acts perpetrated by settler gangs against locals. These acts were not isolated incidents but were part of a broader strategy supported by colonialists and their allies.

The settlers, threatened by the reforms of March 1944 which could have elevated the local elites to positions of power in local and French councils, vehemently opposed these changes. Their influence on the French administration to dissolve the "Friends of Manifesto and Freedom" party was evident. Mr. "Oyé," president of the settler municipalities' federation, repeatedly indicated that such turmoil was inevitable and would prompt General de Gaulle to repeal the March reforms.

#### **• Responsibility of the Nationalists:**

French documents assert that the nationalists were instrumental in precipitating the incidents through:

- The orchestration of a general revolution, with some initiating a more confined revolt.
- Active participation of prominent national movement leaders such as Messali, Al-Ibrahim, and Abbas.
- The mobilization of a contingent of educated youth who were staunch believers in nationalist ideologies.
- Plans that trace back to April 1945, involving two Algerian military officers who traveled to Algiers to devise a comprehensive strategy for revolution.
- French investigative reports conclusively labeling the upheaval as "undoubtedly a revolution," orchestrated primarily by the "Friends of Manifesto and Freedom" party along with factions of the People's Party, with some responsibility also attributed to the Association of Muslim Scholars.

### **8 - Ambiguity of Responsibility for the Event:<sup>20</sup>**

The French narratives surrounding the incident came out confused and unfair. Unofficial writings tended to present biased or sectarian viewpoints. Communists accused reactionaries, nationalists, fascists, and feudal lords. Liberals blamed communism, socialism, and religious fanaticism.

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<sup>19</sup>Abou El KacemSaâdallah, *op. cit.*, pp. 247-255.

<sup>20</sup>Abou El KacemSaâdallah, *ibid.*, p. 256.

Other parties accused each other or held various parties responsible for what happened. Colonists and their like accused revolutionary nationalists, who they claimed wanted to throw France into the sea, thus the truth was lost amid sectarian bias and the politics of electoral interests. Even the known official documents to date generally blame the Algerians for the incident, making them also unfair.

Furthermore, the French documents monopolized the subject, keeping the incident under wraps and monopolizing the news for themselves, possibly overlooking some important foreign documents that are yet to be known.

As for the Algerian documents, they consistently attribute the blame for the killings and massacres to the French, with casualties reportedly around 60,000 on the day the world celebrated the end of the war, as stated by Bachir El Ibrahim.

### **Conclusion:**

The tumult of May 8, 1945, subsided within days, during which France deployed extensive measures of deterrence and brutality to quash what was perceived as either a burgeoning revolution or a nascent national movement, a fact they initially boasted about. However, this stance shifted to regret as they recognized that the brutal repression sown on that day indirectly contributed to the genesis of the November 1, 1954, revolution.

Historian Saâdallah thus lays a foundation for continued research into the complex narrative of May 8, 1945, acknowledging the persistent reiteration of known facts without resolving the intricacies of whether the events were mere incidents, massacres, an uprising, a revolution, or who precisely holds accountability for the catastrophe. The prelude and the eventual unfolding of the events all point towards the inevitability of the May 8, 1945, massacres.

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