Ghania MOUFFOK
Bab-El-Hadid
Translated from French
by K. BROWN & H. DAVIS

For us, it's the capital

of the capital. Nothing happens in Algeria without Bab El-Oued being part of it." Bab El-Oued is best approached like a salad: from the heart. Ahmed was born there 26 years ago, one year after the first coup d'etat in 1965. He grew up here. From the mosques and the neighbourhood, he learned everything he knows. Only the school taught him nothing, nothing but "the language of boredom."

He has a diploma from an institution of higher learning, but remains convinced that Bab El-Oued makes and breaks the things that count in Algeria: football and politics. In the Café de l'Equipe, all the major decisions about the Algerian Football Federation (FAF) are made. Before a news story is printed, the rumour has already made its way around the Place des Trois Horloges. It's known in advance which heads are going to roll, who will rise. Bab El-Oued is full of monuments, symbols at once mythical and historical. The walls, pockmarked by bullets, are engraved in the memory of this village within the city. Then there's the hiding place of the fugitive Bouyali, in a house just opposite the Maillot barracks. Also commemorated are the riots of October 1988, and the arrests of the leaders of the Islamists in June 1991. Merchants haven't repaired the bulletholes in their windows or steel shutters. In the cafés, the empty light bulb sockets are lined up like trophies. On one curb, an old white 1966 Renault 8 stands like an ancient relic. It's a familiar sight, is called Baraka ("God's blessing"), and bears witness to the long-standing bonds between Bab El-Oued and its most beloved imam, Ali Belhadj. It was in that car that the fragile imam used

to ride from Kouba, the neighbourhood where he lived, to the mosques of Bab El-Oued where he gave his first sermons.

This fellow, unknown until he became a star of the FIS while in prison, stirred a generation of kids who today are grown men. Ahmed is one of them, but at the time he was only twelve years old: "Ali Belhadj was the nicest of all the imams," he tells me.

That was in 1978. The regime of Boumediene was already ailing, and the inhabitants of Bab El-Oued were transforming the church opposite the Café Atlas into the El Feth Mosque. On the construction site, it was legal to hold prayer meetings and sermons uncontrolled by the government. The kids sat quietly at Belhadj's feet, listening to this luminary talk about Islam: "We thought he was an Egyptian, he spoke Arabic so well."

Politics hadn't yet come into the mosques. "He educated us, taught us the bases of Islam," and satisfied himself with "poking fun at the powers that be." Mocking the cultural model of the state, he ironically criticized the "Dascotheques of Sidi Ferruch." His mangling of the French language, "which he did on purpose," made his audience burst into laughter. The same Ali Belhadj who terrorized a part of Algeria also won over the irreverent kids of Bab El-Oued with humour. Every one of them here believes he owes him something. For Ahmed, it was the master's teachings that freed him from the "*a'in*", the evil eye. As a fragile child, he'd fallen into some thorns, and his mother had covered him with talismans and incantations and hurried him to the tomb of the saint Sidi Abderrahman. Ali Belhadj taught them for the first time that such practises "*la yajuz*" — were forbidden by Islam, that they must "pray to God, directly."

At that time, the local hero wasn't the Afghan freedom fighter, nor Batman, but Idir: "the strongest man in Bab El-Oued." A criminel with a heart of gold, a pickpocket, he alone had no fear of the police. "He scared people, but he helped the poor."

Today, Idir's star has fallen, drowned in alcohol — wine or eau de cologne, "depending on what's in his wallet." His admirers of yesterday have grown up, and since 1988 they no longer fear uniforms. "They mean nothing."

The mosques offered security to more and more adolescents living squeezed into apartments which had seemed huge to their parents when they first moved into them in 1962. Meanwhile, the Algerian state tried its hand at another type of education. Its code name: Campaign for Purification. It was front page news in all the newspapers in 1979. Boumediene was dead. Dogs, German shepherds, criss-crossed the city; the hunt was on for the "social scourge." Hamaloulou was the police official responsible for this operation. His name was to become legendary, designating from then on anyone in uniform. The police cruised the city in vans; women were advised to take their laundry inside, to take down the blankets left out to air in the sun. All this created disorder. Street traders were systematically harrassed. In the sidestreets little kids no longer had the right to play ball. If the police didn't pop the balls with a knife, they confiscated them — makeshift balls made from milk cartons and rolled up copies of old *El Moudjahid* newspapers.

"That was the first time I got clubbed," Nabil remembers. He was only twelve years old. There was only one way to get revenge: through that ferocious and untranslantable humour, the language of the street. The word against the billyclub. That was the first break between authority and the street. Their parents suspected nothing, didn't understand: "They had other things on their minds...."

The streets were beyond control, every empty space filled with kids. The power structure tried to discipline the streets with policemen's clubs, a poor choice of weapon. But in its confusion the system had vaguely senseed that it faced its greatest enemy: rampant demographic growth.

In the first years of the Chadli regime a Ministry of Social Affairs was created with the almost exclusive purpose of birth control. But it was too late. Nine years later in October 1988, Algeria discovered Ali Belhadj. He was the only man capable of calming the anger of the "neighbourhoods of the common people."

Djema'a Es-Sunna: this mosque, today a symbol of the confrontation between the army and the FIS, doesn't look like much. A horrible ramshackle building of red brick, three stories high, it doesn't even have a minaret. It has been "under

construction" for the past ten years, for as a construction site it eludes state control. After their eviction from the El-Feth mosque (a former church) by an "FLN imam" who raced through the prayer, the Islamists sought refuge in Djema'a Es-Sunna.

In 1982, Ali Belhadj was arrested for the first time; all of his students considered that "this was an injustice." When he got out of prison, "he became agressive." Ali Belhadj now became a legend. "He exploded, he became a star." Today Mohamed, 29 years old, a highly trained maintenance technician, is afraid. He's afraid of what tomorrow may bring. "We've seen everything in Bab El-Oued. We used to see shooting only in films...now it's an everyday normal occurence. We'd like to put wheels under Djema'a Es-Sunna and take it elsewhere." Bab El-Oued is tired of its legend: "We're fed up, fed up with the same old thing." Sitting around a table, Mohamed and his mates sip their coffee: "We're the silent majority." As far as they're concerned, nothing is as it should be. They are deeply religious, they studied in the mosques. But now, on Fridays, they prefer praying at home. "We can't even take our children there any longer." They're nauseated by politics. "People used to leave the mosques with books under their arms...now they all have newspapers....Nothing but politics. They've forgotten all about God."

None of them has grown a beard, some of them voted for FIS, others preferred to abstain, all of them perform their prayers and are defenders of Bab El-Oued. "To belong to Bab El-Oued is like being an immigrant in France. You're immediately looked upon as suspicious. If you also have a beard, then you've had it...you must be guilty!!!" Today when they hear their young neighbours talk about a Kalachnikov as if it were a toy, they're overwhelmed by silent rage: "they're kids with nothing to do."

Outside it's raining. They're afraid, not for themselves, for the others: "I don't want to hear any more shots. I fear for those who are innocent." It's a fear, a premonition; a rumour, like a burst of cloud, batters against all the windows. The FIS lives on and calls for a rendezvous, Friday at the Sunna mosque.

30 January 1992