

The Role of Commander Abdelrahman Ben Salem in the Souk Ahras Region Through the Overseas Archives

Dr. Souad Belbekkouche ¹

¹ Contemporary History, University of Constantine 2, Abdelhamid Mehri, Algeria
Email: souad.belbekkouche@univ-constantine2.dz

Abstract---This paper aims to shed light on one of the key figures who played a significant role in the Souk Ahras region, based on a collection of archival documents obtained from the Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer (Overseas Archives) in Aix-en-Provence. We seek to trace the trajectory of this figure, who had defected from the French army and joined the Algerian Revolution in the Souk Ahras area (Douar Ouled Dhia). This defection enabled him to establish ties with several Tunisian allies, including Mahjoub Ben Ali, without preventing him from maintaining a relationship with El-Wardi Kettal, as evidenced by correspondence between them. These documents also contain critical information about his command headquarters, located on Tunisian territory approximately 15 km west of Ghardimaou (Ghar Dimaou), alongside the Second Battalion of Souk Ahras—its structure, organization, and his role in confronting the Morice Line. Additionally, the documents highlight several battles in which "Commander Ben Salem" took part in the Souk Ahras region.

Keywords---Algerian Revolution, Souk Ahras, Abdelrahman Ben Salem, Overseas Archives, Trajectory.

Introduction

Historical writing is one of the most significant topics in our time, particularly in light of the technological advancements the world has witnessed. As a result, most societies have been able to keep pace with this progress and document their history across different eras. This process relies fundamentally on a body of archival documents, which serve as crucial sources for any historical study.

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Writing the contemporary history of Algeria in general—and the history of the Algerian Revolution in particular—requires objective scholarly material that offers verified historical facts and valuable information. These archival documents vary in content; some are political, others military in nature. Additionally, they often reveal the crimes committed by French colonialism against humanity—horrific acts perpetrated against an unarmed population. In response, the Algerian people launched a fierce struggle to reclaim their sovereignty, culminating in the outbreak of the November 1954 Revolution, which resonated around the world. Today, history remembers Algeria as the miracle that shattered the myth of France, thanks to men who honored their promises to God—men who believed in the revolution with all their hearts and souls and sacrificed themselves so that an independent Algeria could be born.

Among the revolutionary leaders and figures who emerged during those years of struggle, we highlight the freedom fighter and commander Abdelrahman Ben Salem, who played a major role in the liberation war in the Souk Ahras region and along the border under the command of Amara Bouglez. Due to his significant contribution to the revolution, we aim to examine the trajectory of this figure through what we have uncovered in the Archives d'Outre-Mer (Overseas Archives).

Commander Abdelrahman Ben Salem was one of the key revolutionary leaders in the Souk Ahras area, particularly in the Wachatat sector. He remained actively engaged in armed resistance until Algeria achieved independence. Within this context, we ask: How do the documents from the Overseas Archives portray the figure of the freedom fighter Abdelrahman Ben Salem?

To address this question, this study is divided into the following sections:

1-A historical overview of the Souk Ahras region

2-Commander Abdelrahman Ben Salem as portrayed through archival documents

1. The Situation in Souk Ahras at the Outset of the Revolution:

There was continuous planning and coordination among the revolutionary leadership prior to the outbreak of the Algerian Revolution. The aim was to assess the situation, study existing conditions, and finalize the organizational structures necessary to launch the uprising. Within this framework, Didouche Mourad, commander of the Second Zone (North Constantine), visited the Souk Ahras region to coordinate with its local leader, Baji Mokhtar, since the area fell under the jurisdiction of the Second Zone. The purpose of the visit was to finalize preparations for launching armed operations and to distribute the November 1st Proclamation (Kdid, 2023, p.129).

Preparations for the revolution in this region were carried out under challenging circumstances (Majn, 1987,p.85), primarily due to the withdrawal of some previously organized members from revolutionary commitments, (Braktia, (n.d.), p.22) in addition to internal conflicts that had emerged within the Souk Ahras area (Saidani, 2001, p.41). These factors and indications led to a delay in the revolutionary outbreak in the Souk Ahras region (Braktia, (n.d.), p.22).

However, according to archival documents (Zebiri, 2008, p.60), the region maintained a degree of autonomy up until the death of Baji Mokhtar¹.

As for Baji Mokhtar's first successful operation (Stora, 1985, p.321), it took place on the night of November 7–8, when he carried out the first revolutionary action against the Nador Mine in Hammam N'bail (Amara, 2020, p.221) in Oued Chaham. Alongside his aides, he managed to seize explosives, a quantity of gunpowder, and military rifles from the French colonial forces, as well as blow up a section of the railway line (Zebiri, 2008, p.60,61).

¹ S.H.D, Vincennes, Box 1 H 1944/D3, Intelligence Bulletin, 1955.

Following the martyrdom of Baji Mokhtar, the Souk Ahras region fell into a period of internal conflict among various local leaders, each vying for command of the region and claiming the right to succeed him. In the far north, there were factions under the leadership of Amar Ben Aouda and Amar El-Askari, known as Bouglez. In the south, El-Hadj Abdallah and El-Hadj Lakhdar held influence. In the central area, Djebbar Omar led forces, while in the west, Abdallah Nououria asserted control.

Each of these figures considered themselves the most rightful to lead. In light of this leadership crisis, Djebbar Omar reached out to the First Zone (Aurès region), prompting the revolutionary leadership to dispatch the martyr Ahmed El-Aurassi (Heshmawi, 2000, p.26). He succeeded in reviving revolutionary activity in the region.

As for the reasons that led Djebbar Omar to turn to the Aurès, despite the fact that Souk Ahras was officially part of the Second Zone (North Constantine), it was due to the region's urgent need for support—needs that the Aurès responded to by supplying fighters and weapons ((Kdid, 2023, p.126) .

During a meeting held in Beni Sbih following the outbreak of the Algerian Revolution—which was attended by Didouche Mourad, Youssef Zighout, and Ben Tabbal—the objective was to assess the initial phase of the revolution, establish a strategy for its next steps, and discuss matters related to supplies and the coordination of revolutionary operations.

At this meeting, it was decided that a delegation would head to the Souk Ahras region to re-establish contact and assess the situation on the ground following the martyrdom of Baji Mokhtar (Kdid, 2023, p.152).

In light of these developments, Djebbar Omar traveled to Aïn El-Kalaa and met with Bachir Chihani in October 1955. During this meeting, Chihani approved the decision to appoint Djebbar Omar as the new head of the Souk Ahras region following the death of Baji Mokhtar (Al-Ayashi, 1985,p.45,46) .

In this same context, a French intelligence document mentioned that the Souk Ahras region was enjoying a form of autonomous governance under the leadership of Djebbar Omar, although it remained under the authority of Bachir Chihani².

Despite the intense competition over leadership of the Souk Ahras region, Djebbar Omar succeeded in asserting his authority through the effective strategy he implemented (Braktia, (n.d.), p.23). As a result, the region was divided among several commanders: Maarefia El-Sebti, Mohamed Lakhdar Sirine, Mohamed Ejlailia, Abdallah Essalmi, and Mohamed Lsenab. By virtue of their roles within the leadership, they held a meeting in October 1955 under the supervision of Djebbar Omar at Mount Boussou, located south of the city of Taoura. During this meeting, responsibilities were distributed, and each commander was assigned to a specific area to lead (Belkharshouch, 2016, p.371), based on the resources and capacities available within that zone. In early October 1955, Bachir Chihani, head of the High Command of the National Liberation Army, appointed El-Wardi Kettal as the new commander of the Souk Ahras region.

However, upon his arrival, it was found that Djebbar Omar was already in charge of the area. Djebbar Omar refused to hand over authority to El-Wardi Kettal, considering him an outsider unfamiliar with the region. Although El-Wardi Kettal was officially dispatched to Souk Ahras, his appointment only deepened internal divisions and led to numerous transgressions, particularly due to his unfamiliarity with the area³. Djebbar Omar was not satisfied with this decision and openly rejected it, refusing to recognize El-Wardi Kettal's revolutionary authority. He asserted his own right to lead the region,

² S.H.D, Vincennes, Box 1 H 1944/D3, Intelligence Bulletin, 1955.

³ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/147, Intelligence Bulletin, 1956.

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especially given his role in reorganizing and stabilizing it after the martyrdom of Baji Mokhtar (Belkharshouch, 2016, p.371), and in light of leadership errors that had occurred in the nearby regions of Annaba and El Kala (Hamrouchi, 2023, p.63).

However, the new developments in the First Zone—most notably the elimination of Bachir Chihani—paved the way for Abbas Laghrour to assume leadership of the Aurès region, with Ajel Ajoul appointed as a member of its command. This leadership was responsible for appointments in both Tébessa and Souk Ahras (El Askari, 2019, p.48), and as such, it issued orders to El-Wardi Kettal (Qatal, 2018, p.115) to establish a small high command in the Souk Ahras region⁴.

Among the challenges faced by the Souk Ahras region was the arrival of Abdallah Nououria from the Aurès, with the aim of taking command over a sector comprising two-thirds (Abbas, 2009, p.76) of the territory already under the leadership of Amar Ben Aouda. Additionally, there was an attempt to incorporate the Souk Ahras region into another jurisdiction, despite the fact that Nououria himself belonged to the Second Zone.

It appears that Ben Mostefa Benaouda eventually yielded to the new realities imposed upon his region. However, Amar Bouglez rejected the move, insisting that the Souk Ahras region originally belonged to the Second Zone and should remain under its authority (El Askari, 2019, p.35).

Following the assassination of Djebbar Omar, Commanders Amar Benaouda and Ibrahim Mazhoudi arrived to announce the convening of the Soummam Congress and communicate its decisions. However, they were fully aware of the difficult situation in the region (El Askari, 2019, p.46). They attempted to meet with El-Wardi Kettal, but he refused to see them—apparently fearing disciplinary action. This decision had disastrous consequences, including the defection of some of his soldiers to the French army.

In the aftermath of Djebbar Omar's elimination and El-Wardi Kettal's withdrawal from Souk Ahras to avoid further conflict—relocating instead to Tébessa (Braktia, (n.d.), p.52). a new leadership was established. Amar Bouglez and Saleh El-Bay were appointed to lead the Souk Ahras region (Belkharshouch, 2016, p.372). Both worked to develop and stabilize the area until the establishment of the Eastern Base in 1957.

Eventually, Amar El-Askari became the commander of Souk Ahras (Benjedid, 2011, p.85). However, he was unable to meet with the higher revolutionary leadership due to the dangerous and unstable conditions prevailing in the region—conditions that nearly fractured the unity of the mujahideen.

2-Abdelrahman Ben Salem in Archival Documents:

1.2.the career of commander Abderhman Ben Salem :

Some sources indicate that the freedom fighter Ben Salem was born in Ain Kerma, in the current El Tarf province, in 1923. He came from a farming family and, like most Algerian children at the time, did not attend French schools due to the difficult socio-economic conditions. He joined the ranks of the revolution in the Souk Ahras region following the establishment of the Eastern Base, and was later appointed as the commander of a battalion (Bensaber & Ferkous, (n.d.), p.7).

Meanwhile, a French intelligence archive document titled "The Defector Abdelrahman Ben Salem", dated October 3, 1956, provides a profile of him. It states: "Abdelrahman Ben Salem Ben Mohamed, originally from the hamlet of El Hanshir (Douar Chiyabna, which belongs to El Kala), has recently

⁴ S.H.D, Vincennes, Box 1 H 1698, Intelligence summary, 1956.

defected from the French army and is expected to join the rebels (a term used by the French authorities for the revolutionary fighters) operating in Douar Ouled Diyaa⁵, part of the Souk Ahras region..."

The document further adds that "Abdelrahman Ben Salem established contact with Mahjoub Ben Ali, a Tunisian from Souk El-Arbaa, who promised him three things: mortar shells, Tunisian fighters to assist him..."⁶

By the end of 1956, following the decisions of the Soummam Congress, the Souk Ahras region was reorganized into three sub-regions, each further divided into three sections. The Eastern Base was formed with a council headed by Amara Bouglez, assisted by three key commanders:

- First Deputy: Commander Mohamed Aouachria, responsible for military affairs
- Second Deputy: Commander El-Hadj Lakhdar, responsible for political affairs
- Third Deputy: Commander Tahar Saad Essaoud, responsible for communications and intelligence. The initial headquarters of the Eastern Base was successively located in El-Raida, El-Fahis, Mount El-Deer, Mount Ben Salah, Hammam Sidi Tradd, and then Souk El-Arbaa (Lahrach, 2010, p.119) .

On the other hand, the Eastern Base was divided into three main zones:

- Zone 1: Led by Chouichi El-Aissani, covering El Kala and its surroundings
- Zone 2: Led by Abdelrahman Ben Salem, located in the northern part of Souk Ahras
- Zone 3: Led by Tahar Zebiri, covering the southeast of Souk Ahras near El Kef (Helis, (n.d.), p. 17) . Each zone had its own battalion, composed of three to four companies, with a total force of approximately 600 soldiers (Zebiri, (2008, p. 180)).

2-2. The struggle of mujahid Abderahman Ben Salem as reflected in archival documents :

Based on another report dated July 5, 1956, the French intelligence recorded information regarding the whereabouts of Ben Salem. It states: "...During an operation conducted in the Eastern Operations Zone, documents were recovered from Mount El Kala. Upon the arrival of French forces, the rebels fled hastily, leaving behind a satchel containing numerous notebooks and letters. Examination of these documents revealed that they belonged to Abdelrahman Ben Salem, wanted by the French authorities. He was the commander of the 3rd battalion and had escaped from a farm on March 7, 1956. He is currently the head of the rebel sector in Washtata, Souk Ahras, and is part of the group residing with the Tunisian rebel leader Mahjoub Ben Ali..."⁷ .

In the same context, the name Abdelrahman Ben Salem appears in an annex containing translations of three letters found in a mujahid's bag, as follows:

The first letter: Addressed from Mahjoub Ben Ali, representative of Habib Bourguiba, to Mahmoud Cherif, leader of the Algerian rebels — dated April 18, 1956.

The second letter: Dated May 23, sent by El-Wardi Kettal, commander of the Souk Ahras region, to Abdelrahman Ben Salem, commander of the rebellion sector in Washtata. This group maintains contact with the Tunisian rebel leader Mahjoub Ben Ali.

The third letter: Sent on June 2, 1956, from Mahjoub Ben Ali to Abdelrahman Ben Salem⁸.

It is noteworthy that the conflicts intensified further in mid-1956 between the leadership of the Nememcha and the general command in the Aurès region. These tensions took a decisive turn, particularly following the killing of Djebbar Omar in the Souk Ahras area in February 1956, under accusations of rebellion against the general command in the Aurès (. Meanwhile, Ennamoushi El-Wardi fled to Tebessa and allied himself with a group of Nememcha fighters led by Lazhar Cherrit. This group declared their secession from the Aurès region. Consequently, the Nememcha leadership

⁵ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 146, Deserter Ben Salem Abderrahmane, 1956.

⁶ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 146, Deserter Ben Salem Abderrahmane, 1956.

⁷ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Assistance provided by Tunisia to the rebellion, 1956 .

⁸ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Translation, 1956.

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received a message from Tunisia in July 1956 inviting them to attend a major meeting chaired by Ahmed Ben Bella, aimed at establishing a new framework for dialogue and reconciliation⁹.

An archival document dated July 1956 sheds light on the situation along the Algerian-Tunisian border. It records that on March 15, 1956, an agreement was concluded between Mahjoub Ben Ali on one side, and Si El-Wardi Kettal, Si Allawa, Ammar Boukellaz, Djebbar Omar, and Lsenab on the other. The agreement outlined the mode of conduct and daily practices adopted by Algerian and Tunisian revolutionaries operating in the border zone¹⁰.

According to the terms of this accord, Algerian fighters were not permitted to enter Tunisian territory without prior authorization from Mahjoub Ben Ali. During their stay, they were to be treated with hospitality, provided that they refrained from committing any acts of looting against the local population.

Moreover, with regard to arms, equipment, and other supplies made available by Tunisia, the agreement stipulated—based on Mahjoub's directives—that the Algerian mujahideen could count on the full moral and material support of President Habib Bourguiba and the Tunisian people¹¹.

As for the third letter, which is of particular importance to our discussion, it was sent by Mahjoub Ben Ali to Abderrahmane Ben Salem. In this correspondence, Mahjoub emphasized the necessity of returning all civilians who had abandoned their homes back to their places of residence by all available means and methods. Regarding traitors and collaborators with the colonial authorities, he stressed that any individual clearly and definitively accused of a specific offense should be dealt with accordingly, without leniency—this applied specifically to Algerians.

Mahjoub further stated that civilians who had left their homes to seek refuge near French colonial military posts must be returned to their villages, or at the very least removed from those positions. Otherwise, he warned, “we will treat them as we treat the colonial army.” The letter concludes with the line: “I, Mahjoub Ben Ali, await your response regarding them...”

On another note, Mahjoub affirmed: “Tunisian fighters must be prevented from crossing the border; otherwise, they must be confronted. As for the French colonial army, we shall fight it wherever we encounter it. My greetings to Brother El-Wardi Kettal...”¹².

In the same context, another letter dated June 3, 1956, provides significant insight into the nature of cooperation between Tunisian and Algerian revolutionaries. Addressed to Ben Salem, the letter states: “To my brother Abderrahmane, greetings. I have received your letter and I am satisfied with your good conduct. Inform me about the clothing situation, as we have sent a considerable amount. As for food, there is no harm in being fed by well-off families, and in this regard, we welcome you warmly. I ask that you leave the civilian population in peace and that you prevent Mahmoud Cherif from committing reprehensible acts against them¹³.” This letter is signed by Mahjoub Ben Ali.

The situation along the borders was difficult, as revealed by another document dated June 28, 1956. This document addressed the situation along the Algerian-Tunisian frontier and examined the mindset

⁹ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Rebel command post in Tunisia, 1956.,

¹⁰ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, intelligence report: Situation on the Algerian-Tunisian border and in Tunisia, 1956.

¹¹ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Verso, literal translation, 1956.

¹² FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Translation, 1956.

¹³ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Shipping note, 1956

of the Muslim population in Tunisia¹⁴ and the broader Middle East. It also provided information regarding the rapid and significant growth of the rebel organization in Tunisia¹⁵.

It is worth noting that the strategic position of the eastern border regions played a vital role in the activation and advancement of the Algerian Revolution from its very outset, particularly through the supply of arms, owing to their geographic openness toward Tunisia. This made it imperative to establish a well-structured organization to manage the affairs of this crucial zone and to provide sustained support for the revolutionary effort (Heshmawi, 1998, p. 154). This laid the groundwork for the later establishment of the Eastern Base (La Base de l'Est).

Furthermore, it must be emphasized that revolutionary leaders in Tunisia succeeded in reaching an agreement concerning the Wilaya of Souk Ahras, which now permits the free movement of communications from northern Constantine across its territory—and possibly even demonstrates a growing attachment to this role¹⁶.

A French intelligence document dated August 13, 1956, claims that Habib Bourguiba sent an order to Mahjoub Ben Ali at his command center in Souk El Arba, instructing him to summon Amara Boukelaz (referred to as “the military Amara”), the newly appointed commander of the Souk Ahras region, who had established his headquarters in Souk El Arba on Tunisian soil. Meanwhile, Abderrahmane Ben Salem was appointed as head of the Oued Chattata sector and was tasked with overseeing the supply of weapons to the region from Tunisia¹⁷.

With regard to the issue of armament, weapons were being smuggled from Egypt to Tripoli, then transported via camel caravans to Tunisia. From there, the arms and ammunition were loaded onto trucks and moved toward the Algerian-Tunisian border. The final leg of the journey into Algeria was carried out using mule convoys. The costs of these arms transfers into Algeria were reportedly covered by Amara Boukelaz and Captain Mahjoub Ben Ali, after which the weapons were distributed across all the historic regions within Algeria¹⁸.

Given the mobility and flexibility of the rebel detachments in crossing the border, interception maneuvers were, in most cases, ineffective. Weapons were transported either by logistical units specialized in this task—one such battalion was reportedly based in the Wilaya of Souk Ahras—or by the very rebel convoys returning from Tunisia after being resupplied there. As a result, interception efforts often took the form of skirmishes, similar to other clashes, and could take place far from the actual border¹⁹ and not necessarily at crossing points.

For example, in Souk El Arba, the local governor recently ordered the Algerian fighters to cease all activities and relocate their headquarters. At the time, there were approximately 700 armed insurgents stationed at this center²⁰. Moreover, in his most recent speech on April 11, Habib Bourguiba announced the establishment of border posts to be guarded by the Tunisian army. This deployment was effectively intended for the Ghardimaou area, located along the Algerian-Tunisian frontier.

It is essential to highlight the situation along the Algerian-Tunisian border as of June 17, 1956, according to an intelligence memorandum. A source from the North African secret intelligence service reported on the internal situation in Tunisia, as well as the eastern region of the Annaba area. According

¹⁴ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 146, Intelligence Bulletin, 1957.

¹⁵ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 146, Intelligence Bulletin, 1957.

¹⁶ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 146, Convocation by Bourguiba, 1956.

¹⁷ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 149, Arms trafficking, 1956.

¹⁸ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Arms trafficking across the Tunisian border, 1957.

¹⁹ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Le F.L.N of Tunisia, (N.d).

²⁰ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Intelligence report: Situation on the Algerian-Tunisian border and in Tunisia, 1956.

to the report, there was free movement toward the western border region of Tunisia, facilitated by fellaheen (peasant fighters) operating in the eastern border zone of Algeria. Organized groups were regularly sent by sea to Souk Ahras, often in units composed of two or three individuals, while the wounded and ill were transported to Tunisia, where they were reportedly received under arms.

During their rest periods in Tunisia, these Algerian fellaheen wore ordinary civilian clothing. Although they did not carry any official identification papers, they showed no concern, as any intervention by French authorities was quickly rendered ineffective due to the close cooperation with Tunisian authorities. It appears that Tunisia provided these Algerian fighters with essential supplies, including foodstuffs such as semolina and oil, as well as clothing, equipment, weapons, and ammunition.

Among the main entry points for these trucks were Fériana or Souk El Ahad, located approximately 10 kilometers south of Aïn Draham and Ghardimaou. According to the report, no one monitored these vehicles on Tunisian territory, as they moved under the protection of the local administrative authorities²¹.

The report further alleges that Habib Bourguiba actively encouraged Tunisians who wished to join the ranks of the Algerian rebels, providing them with clothing, equipment, and weapons for this purpose. His representative, Mahjoub Ben Ali, had established his command center in Souk Ahras, where Tunisian fighters were reportedly stationed in a former military barracks. Mahjoub himself was based in Souk El Arba, which the author of the report claimed to have visited. He was described as wearing a lieutenant's uniform, with two golden epaulettes on his shoulders and a very dark-colored cap.

The report also notes that the Algerian revolutionary leadership closely followed the fate of Tunisia and Morocco, even though the United Nations had been unable to resolve their cases due to France's refusal to consider any proposed solutions²². Additionally, the report mentions the activities of Salah Ben Youssef in southern Tunisia, where he was reportedly involved in organizing the passage of convoys transporting arms and ammunition from Tripoli.

French intelligence reports indicate that First Sergeant Ben Salem Abderrahmane, who had defected from the 3rd Division, enjoyed a highly favorable reputation in Tunisia and appeared to possess the qualities of a great leader. He was expected to replace Si Ahmed El-Kebaili, who was set to relinquish command of the Oued Chattata and Mghassen sectors to join Si Allawa in the Bouguess area of Ouled Youb.

During this period, El-Wardi Kettal returned to the south accompanied by more than 100 fighters from the Chaouia²³ tribe to defend their homeland. Furthermore, it was reported that the position at Ghabat Es-Sarâa in Oued Chattata—located in Tunisian territory approximately 13 to 14 kilometers southeast of Lami—was to be evacuated on June 16 by the French forces who had been stationed there until that time. They were to be replaced by supporters of Mahjoub Ben Ali²⁴.

Northern Sector: The Souk El Arba Committee, chaired by Abdelwahab Mohamed Al-Aifa, was responsible for supplying weapons and equipment to the Souk Ahras region and the command center at Semandou. These supplies were transported via Captain Mahjoub Ben Ali, the former commander of the Tunisian Fellaqa (irregular troops), who also served as head of the mobile gendarmerie unit in Souk

²¹ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Intelligence report: Situation on the Algerian-Tunisian border and in Tunisia, 1956.

²² FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Intelligence report: Situation on the Algerian-Tunisian border and in Tunisia, 1956.

²³ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Intelligence report: Situation on the Algerian-Tunisian border and in Tunisia, 1956.

²⁴ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Intelligence Bulletin, 1956.

El Arba, and Ben Salem Abderrahmane, a defector from the 3rd Division assigned to the Oued Chattata border sector²⁵.

The document also indicates that approximately 800 firearms and 126,000 rounds of ammunition were shipped from Tunisia or Tripoli to the Thlibet base. Subsequently, over 300 weapons and 50,000 cartridges were transported through the Souk El Arba ²⁶base on the border.

According to French intelligence, they had monitored the movements of rebel leaders in Tunisia over the past weeks and managed to accurately identify the location of the new command center, thanks to the testimonies of two prisoners. The gathered information is as follows:

1. Abderrahmane Ben Salem was the commander of the Second Battalion of the Wilaya of Souk Ahras, stationed on Tunisian territory approximately 15 kilometers west of Ghardimaou.
2. Mahmoud Qanz, who referred to himself as the commander of Region 5 of the Wilaya of Aurès—Nammamcha—located about 8 kilometers southeast of Qalaat Senan and also within Tunisian territory. The leaders of the Algerian revolution continued to move cautiously and operate discreetly within Tunisia.

French intelligence was also able to determine the quantities of weapons sent: 260 firearms had entered Algeria, while Tunisian authorities reported receiving only 15 weapons over a three-month period. Additionally, Algerian units were being trained and equipped in Libya, with sixty of these fighters expected soon to join Tadjrouine before being sent to Tunisia. The transfer of arms for the rebels continued overland from Libya to Tunisia ²⁷, and then onward into Algeria.

Subsequently, some developments occurred: as of January 1957, Abderrahmane Ben Salem was appointed commander of the Second Corps, which comprised three battalions:

- 4th Battalion: Commanded by Mohamed Bchichi.
- 5th Battalion: Led by Mabrouk Aryan.
- 6th Battalion: Headed by Mohamed Cherif Asfour (Bouchlaghem, 1980, p.21) , who was praised by Tahar Saïdani as “a seasoned and intelligent commander... with rare courage.”(Saidani, 2001, p.28)

Conclusion

The jihadist trajectory of the mujahid leader Abderrahmane Ben Salem, from his participation in the Indochina War up until Algeria's independence, requires in-depth and dedicated studies. Tracking his path and gathering key details is not an easy task, especially given the scarcity of archival documents that cover significant historical gaps. After my study, I have reached the following conclusions:

- He played an important role in organizing the Oued Chattata sector in Souk Ahras, as evidenced by numerous archival documents from Aix-en-Provence.
- He contributed significantly and successfully to the smuggling of weapon convoys from Tunisia to Souk Ahras, owing to his connections with certain Tunisian revolutionaries.
- He was among the close cadres who witnessed and collaborated with several leaders such as Amara Boukelaz, Mahjoub Ben Ali (the Tunisian), El-Wardi Kettal, Mahmoud Cherif, and Habib Bourguiba.

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²⁵ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Intelligence Bulletin, 1956.

²⁶ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Rebel command post in Tunisia, (N.d)

²⁷ FR A.N.O.M, Aix-en-Provence, 93/ 147, Intelligence Bulletin, 1956

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