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Ben Barka Case: Why the Abduction?

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PARIS, Jan. 22 — "Is my brother living? Is he dead? Let those who claim to know speak out."

Thus did Mehdi Ben Barka's brother, Abdelkader, wearily appeal on French television last night for news of the central figure in a trans-Mediterranean scandal that has rocked Paris and threatened a break between President de Gaulle and King Hassan II of Morocco.

Mr. Ben Barka, a 45-year-old leftwing political exile who had wandered abroad since mid-1963, was kidnapped at noon here last Oct. 29.

He was taken by a car from the sidewalk outside a new American-style "drug store" on the Boulevard Saint-Germain-des-Prés on the Left Bank. Involved in the plot against him were French secret agents, French underworld figures and, allegedly, three Moroccan officials headed by the Interior Minister, Gen. Mohammed Oufkir.

Why was Mr. Ben Barka kidnapped?

Was this little, intense, bushy-browed founder of Morocco's left-wing Opposition regarded as a political threat to the King? Or was General Oufkir, as Abdelkader Ben Barka charges, trying to cut short a reconciliation between the King and his long-time foe?

The answer lies perhaps in the cruel intricacies of Moroccan politics, a special Arab blend of personal feuds and shifting alliances, of sudden "fraternity" and sudden denunciation.

A Grocer's Son

Mehdi Ben Barka, the son of a grocer, had been an articulate, tempestuous fighter in this Byzantine climate much of his life.

He was still a teen-age student of mathematics at a secondary school in his native Rabat when he joined the semi- clandestine movement for Moroccan independence from France.

He infuriated his French teachers by showing up one day in class wearing an oversized "chechia," the traditional conical cap of Moroccan Moslems, and, before World War II, a nationalist symbol.

Not long afterward, at the University of Algiers, he became first a member, then president of the Association of North African Students, grouping young nationalist firebrands from Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria.



Mehdi Ben Barka

During this period, he was arrested several times by the French police and was released quickly each time.

He was a promising mathematician. His French friends on the Algiers faculty intervened with the authorities when his political activities brought policemen to his door.

When Mr. Ben Barka returned to Rabat in 1943, his fellow Moroccan intellectuals were seething with nationalist fervor, stimulated by allied promises of self-determination and France's wartime defeats.

Moslem high school students refused to attend classes in protest against French rule. Mr. Ben Barka himself took part in street clashes with French riot policemen in Fez and Casablanca.

At the age of 24, ostensibly only a high school teacher of mathematics at Rabat, he became one of the most active leaders of the nationalist Istiqlal (Independence) party.

The Sultan of Morocco, who later became independent Morocco's first King as Mohammed V, chose Mr. Ben Barka as one of the tutors for his young son, Prince Hassan. The Prince was to succeed to the throne in 1961.

No lasting bond was created between the bright but fun-loving Prince and his austere tutor who was later to attack bitterly the luxurious living habits of independent Morocco's ruling classes.

"Ben Barka's an ambitious man," the Prince was reported to have told the radical's friends. "He wants to do too much, and so he won't accomplish anything in the end."

In the fight for independence, Mr. Ben Barka spent more than three years between 1951 and 1954 under house arrest in the Moroccan Sahara, helped reorganize the Istiqlal party and participated in the negotiation in 1955 that led to end of the French protectorate.

After independence in 1956 he was elected president of the National Consultative Assembly, which became his personal forum if little more.

Although Mr. Ben Barka pledged fidelity to Mohammed V, the King tired of the Assembly's polemics and dissolved it.

Meanwhile Mr. Ben Barka had broken with the conservative wing of Istiqlal, made off with the left wing and founded the National Union of Popular Forces in 1959.

With strong Socialist leanings, vaguely echoing the slogans of the French left, the new party had the support of big-city labor leaders and Morocco's politically active students.

Police Abuses Denounced

While his fellow leftists gained ministerial posts in periodic Cabinet shuffles, Mr. Ben Barka fiercely attacked police abuses in fiery Arabic, called for the seizure of French-owned farmland and "the mobilization of Morocco's human resources."

It was Mr. Ben Barka's heyday. He was hailed by left-wing Paris intellectuals and by Moroccan street crowds.

Of the Istiqlal old guard, his former companions and political elders, he would say:

"They talk of a revolution in Morocco. But they only talk. In fact, all they have done is take over power from the French."

Mr. Ben Barka drew the enmity of Rabat conservatives, the army, the Moslem landowners and jealous left-wingers as well.

From 1960 to 1962, he lived in Paris as a kind of semi-exile, studying "econometrics," traveling to Peking, Havana, Cairo and other "revolutionary" capitals. He was deeply impressed by the austere Chinese Communist approach.

"That's the only way an underdeveloped country like ours can grow," he told a friend later.

But in Morocco, where even leaders of the officially banned Communist party build backyard swimming pools, the

Peking approach found little but verbal sympathy.

Mr. Ben Barka won election from Rabat to Morocco's short-lived National Assembly in 1963.

Soon afterward, in July, the Government unveiled a leftwing "plot" against the King. Mr. Ben Barka happened to be traveling abroad and escaped arrest.

He was sentenced to death twice in absentia — once for allegedly having been involved in the July "plot," and again for publicly having sided in Cairo with Algeria in the brief Algerian-Moroccan border war later in 1963.

Family Installed in Cairo

For Mr. Ben Barka, it was the beginning of the roving political exile that ended in his kidnapping last October.

Installing his wife, whom he had married in 1949, and four children in Cairo at the Nasser regime's expense, he roamed the "revolutionary" world again.

He became a member of the Communist-backed African-Asian Solidarity Commission in Cairo.

He appeared in Algiers but got little attention from the Algerians despite his sympathy for the then President Ahmed Ben Bella's brand of Arab Socialism.

Last year, he was put in charge of preparing the tricontinental conference of revolutionists held this month in Havana. But it was Moscow and Peking that called the shots, not Mr. Ben Barka.

Back home, as time went on, former Deputy Premier Abderrahim Bouabid and his allies took over as real leaders of the left-wing party that Mr. Ben Barka had founded.

In recent months, they began the traditional undercover dickering with King Hassan II for posts in a new Cabinet. Mr. Ben Barka's name dropped out from political gossip.

Meanwhile, shuttling back and forth from Paris to Geneva to his family in Cairo, Mr. Ben Barka also began some undercover reconciliation talks with representatives of the King.

In 1964, he worried aloud to friends about being followed, kidnapped or assassinated by General Oufkir's agents and foreign accomplices. Later, he seemed more optimistic, discussing compromises, "new options," even a possible modus vivendi with the King's regime.

But if his political power had waned, Mr. Ben Barka still had enemies, notably General Oufkir. What is more, after his kidnapping, his old party associates did not raise much public fuss. The royal palace was silent.

As for the urban poor who once cheered Mr. Ben Barka's calls for "social justice" and "the installation of a concrete democracy," they seemed to have all but forgotten him. Only a handful of Moroccan students demonstrated in his name.