



# Waging Counterinsurgency in ALGERIA

## A FRENCH POINT OF VIEW

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*The FLN (National Liberation Front) estimated in 1962 that nearly eight years of revolution had cost 300,000 dead from war-related causes. Algerian sources later put the figure at approximately 1.5 million dead, while French officials estimated it at 350,000. French military authorities listed their losses at nearly 18,000 dead (6,000 from noncombat-related causes) and 65,000 wounded. European civilian casualties exceeded 10,000 (including 3,000 dead) in 42,000 recorded terrorist incidents. According to French figures, security forces killed 141,000 rebel combatants, and more than 12,000 Algerians died in internal FLN purges during the war. An additional 5,000 died in the “café wars” in France between the FLN and rival Algerian groups. French sources also estimated that 70,000 Muslim civilians were killed, or abducted and presumed killed, by the FLN.<sup>1</sup>*

—Library of Congress, Country Study of Algeria

**O**NE OF THE MOST internally divisive periods in recent French history occurred when France waged war (1954-1962) to retain sovereignty over French territory in Algeria. The French-Algerian war offers an unusually rich case study of an insurgency that contains valuable lessons in the dynamics of counterinsurgency and international conflicts arising from ideological, political, and cultural discontents.

Making comparisons between the French-Algerian war and the conflict in Iraq are tempting from a counterinsurgency (COIN) perspective, but one must remain cautious. Conducting a counterinsurgency campaign is not like cooking; lessons learned from one conflict do not automatically translate into recipes for resolving another. Many in the French military view the war in Algeria as a brilliant operational and tactical success story—and a great strategic and political failure, indeed, a debacle that had devastating short-term consequences for France and long-lasting adverse effects on the French military.

### General Background and Context of the War

It is difficult to describe adequately the depth of feeling the French had toward colonial Algeria. France’s relationship with Algeria as a colony was unique. Situated just across the Mediterranean Sea from France, Algeria was the closest non-continental part of the French Empire. Communications and travel were much easier and much greater than with other colonial outposts. France and Algeria had greater economic interdependence, and some

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PHOTO: French troops seal off Algiers' notorious casbah, a 400-year-old teeming Arab quarter, 27 May 1956 in Algeria, prior to a surprise 18-hour raid which turned up a store of military booty. The 7,500-man raiding party, including 1,500 special police, rounded up 4,480 Arabs, of which 522 were detained as “super suspects.” (AP Photo)

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sectors of Algerian society identified themselves with France politically and culturally. Algeria was more than just a colony to the French. It was actual French territory, not just a vehicle for economic exploitation. About one million ethnic-European French citizens lived in Algeria. One out of every nine Algerians was a descendent of French colonists and regarded Algeria as part of France and an ancestral home. Most Frenchmen in Algeria regarded Algeria in the way that American citizens living in such places as Puerto Rico, Guam (or Alaska and Hawaii before statehood) viewed those places—as legitimate national territories.

Before the French arrived, there was no such place as Algeria in North Africa. The French created Algeria by incorporating a collection of independent city-states, coastal trading communities, and tribal areas into a single economic and political entity. In fact, the French-Algerian war gave birth to the nation of Algeria in the way America's Revolutionary War with England gave birth to the United States.

Algeria's origin and the nature of its relationship with France made the 1954 to 1962 conflict wrenching to the French national consciousness. The Algerian war pitted restive, indigenous North African populations seeking independence against die-hard French-Algerians determined to prevent independence. The French withdrew from Algeria under circumstances the military regarded as humiliating, degrading, and needless.

The war provoked national divisions and civil turmoil in France, and to this day the war's outcome still, from time to time, generates tension. Resentment still simmers over what some Frenchmen view as the needless loss of legitimate French territory, and the conflict continues to influence the relationship between France and Algeria.

Part of this tragic legacy stems from the way the French military chose to deal with the emerging

Algerian insurgency. Believing it had no alternatives, the military resorted to draconian measures—some of which, in retrospect, seem unnecessarily brutal. In addition, high-level French military officers openly rebelled against their elected civilian leaders, and by doing so soiled the honor of the French military.

The French military's defiance of civilian authority came after a long, bitter struggle in Algeria that many in the military believed France had won at the price of heavy casualties. Many in the military expressed shock, revulsion, and outrage at the decision to grant Algeria independence after France had successfully put down the insurgent rebellion. Some regarded the move as a national betrayal. The decision brought dire consequences for French citizens who had put their trust in the government and the military. More than one million French-Algerian refugees were uprooted from their homes and forced to set sail for France after Algeria was granted independence.

Discontent fuelled by these developments led to the attempted assassination of a French president and two attempted military coups against a government that some in the military regarded as anti-French and illegitimate. Ironically, French military and civilian leaders could have learned many useful lessons from the conflict, but failed to do so. Lamentably, but understandably, the French military chose to have collective amnesia about Algeria for 40 years, and the number of people studying France's involvement in Algeria declined sharply.

In time, the need to apply effective counterinsurgency techniques in Iraq and Afghanistan, Africa, Central Asia, and the Far East sparked renewed interest in the lessons of past insurgencies. U.S. agencies have studied and analyzed the French-Algerian war, but minimal French comment in this area continues to hobble efforts to glean lessons learned from the experience.

**France in North Africa.** After Rome destroyed Carthage in 146 B.C., the Romans were among the first Europeans to make contact with the Berbers who inhabited what is now modern-day Algeria. The Romans drove the Berbers back into Africa to make room for Roman settlement on the North African coast. Christianity arrived in the area in the second century A.D., and by the end of the fourth century, most Berbers had converted to it. In the fifth century, the Vandals conquered and settled

the same coastal region. Christianity's influence among the Berbers was relatively short-lived. Arab military expeditions swept through the area in the seventh century, introducing Islam and the Arabic language. In time, the area became known as the Barbary States. Its population lived in urban trading centers, tribal areas in the hinterlands, and in enclaves controlled by pirates or privateers who made their living raiding seafaring traders travelling the Mediterranean.

Modern Algeria's borders began to take shape in 1830 when the French government began exercising political authority over military and trading outposts and a steadily growing area settled by French European  *pied noirs*  (black feet), so named because of their mainly agricultural skills and merchants' experience. To support the growth of agriculture and commerce, France organized "overseas departments" within the French government with northern Algeria prominently represented in the French National Assembly.

By 1848, France had brought nearly all of northern Algeria under its political and economic control. Subsequently, the Second Republic (under Louis-Napoleon) declared the colonized lands part of France itself. Pursuant to this declaration, it made Algiers, Oran, and Constantine French civil territories and administrative units under a civilian government. During this process, indigenous local leaders were either marginalized or eliminated and the educational system done away with.

The French administration of the Second Republic maintained that Algeria's native Muslims and Jews were French nationals, but not French citizens. During France's Third Empire period, Jews living in Algeria, who had been more amenable to French colonization, were given full French citizenship. In 1865, Napoleon III offered full French citizenship to Muslim nationals as well—if they renounced Islamic sharia law. Since most of the 8.4 million Berbers and Arab Muslims living in the area regarded such an action as apostasy, few sought citizenship.

The practical result of this was eventual dissatisfaction over what a majority of the Muslim population came to believe was an illegitimate French occupation. Ironically, such disaffection grew as exposure to French culture and education popularized the ideals of human equality and natural liberty.

Along with the daily humiliation of disenfranchisement, this period was marked by great economic expansion, infrastructure development, and the formation of new Muslim social classes spawned in part by French ideas advocating universal human rights and political independence. This dissonance helped shape a separatist Algerian national identity.

During the early decades of the 20th century, the French administration responded to Muslim political protests and emerging Algerian nationalist sentiment by promulgating laws restricting protest and freedom of expression. This reaction was profoundly counterproductive and had precisely the opposite effect the French intended. Nevertheless, when World War II began, many Algerian Muslims rallied to the French cause.

In March 1943, Muslim leader Ferhat Abbas used war-time Muslim loyalty to France to press for political rights. His "The Manifesto of the Algerian People" demanded the Algerian constitution guarantee Muslims equality under the law and the right to participate in the Algerian political process.

The French government responded to the manifesto in 1944 with a reform proposal of its own that offered full French citizenship to certain Muslims based on a merit system. The Muslim community met this proposal with derision for several reasons, not the least of which was that it allowed only a relatively small number of Muslims to immediately qualify for citizenship. On 8 May 1945, when a pro-independence demonstration turned violent, French military and security forces responded with heavy-handed force to restore order, rounded up protest leaders, and closed centers used for organizing protests. During related actions, approximately 100 Europeans and 15,000 native Muslim activists were killed.

The bloody outcome of the protest produced an uneasy nine-year hiatus in open, organized defiance of the government, but, it also marked an important watershed in the attitudes of many Muslim activists. They no longer believed that peaceful demonstrations or protests would have any impact on changing French policies. Moreover, the French did nothing to change Algerian Muslims' citizenship status.

The French government compounded the problem by focusing on rebuilding continental France from the devastation and disruptions of World War II in a modernization process that had been delayed for decades. France's Fourth Republic, an unstable

political regime, successfully launched modernization projects but could not manage emergency situations like colonial crises effectively. The government's weakness was complicated by the return of French servicemen from Indochina where they had just suffered defeat. Aware that they had abandoned a large number of Vietnamese loyalists to severe punishment or death at the hands of the Vietminh, the French servicemen saw the withdrawal from Vietnam as a stain on their honor. Embittered French officers and NCOs proclaimed that no experience of that kind would ever occur again in the former colonial empire on their watch.

However, the French people did not share this deep resolve. World War II and Indochina had made them indifferent to the situation in Algeria. Sending draftees to fight and die in what most regarded as still another futile foreign war did not sit well with them. Lack of popular enthusiasm for conducting military operations to retain foreign colonies was in step with the rest of the world as well; colonization was out of international favor. The international community was unified in exerting pressure against nations seeking to maintain their former colonies. The major global powers that had emerged from World War II—the U.S. and the Soviet Union—were both championing decolonization and independence movements, even if they did so for different strategic reasons.

French sovereignty over Algeria became more problematic when Algeria's neighboring states, Morocco and Tunisia, became independent. The example of newly independent close neighbors provided an additional stimulus for Algeria to seek independence by any means necessary, including organized insurgency and terrorism. In 1954, one million Euro-French Algerians were living in Algeria among 8.4 million "half citizens," who resented the situation. This set of circumstances set the stage for the open warfare that erupted.

## **The National Liberation Front and the National Liberation Army**

Indigenous opposition groups emerged in response to French intransigence in granting citizenship to Muslims. They were relatively unorganized and their efforts were ineffective at first, until an umbrella organization called the National Liberation Front (NLF) established itself on 1 November

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1954. The NLF gathered most insurgent and activist groups into a single, unified organization to protest social and political inequities, poor economic conditions for the Muslims, poor administration and the lack of social services, and the disregard of religion as a characteristic of national identity, if not government.<sup>2</sup>

The NLF began as a secret organization influenced by mushrooming anti-colonial independence movements. Although it was not a communist organization, the NLF successfully drew upon lessons learned from the Vietminh. Though it capitalized on the experience of Algerian Muslim veterans who had served with the French Army in Indochina, the NLF was a nationalist movement greatly influenced by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the main political figure in northern Africa at the time.

However, the NLF's public appeal was limited because of the brutality with which it pursued its objective. The persecuted and the poor people who suffered most from its sometimes-indiscriminate terrorist acts hated the NLF. It also employed many common criminals recruited for their ability to perform covert actions. Their dishonesty and brutality stained the NLF's reputation. Nevertheless, the NLF ultimately orchestrated most political and coercive insurgent activity.

To manage the movement, the NLF organized a provisional government consisting of a five-man executive committee and a legislative body. The NLF had two stated aims—independence for Algeria and equality for all. It divided Algeria into eight *wilayas* (regions), organized resistance, and prepared the foundation for a future post-colonial administration. Its major strategic line of operation was taking actions calculated to attract global attention to garner international sympathy for its cause and put pressure on the French government. The NLF used pamphlets, articles in newspapers, free

radio, and psychological operations (PSYOP) to control the population; guerrilla activity to control rural areas; and terrorism to intimidate populations into cooperation and undermine confidence in French rule. It infiltrated democratic parties clandestinely to expand its control over the population. The authorities underestimated its influence.

The NLF established an armed wing called the National Army of Liberation (NLA) to conduct military and terror operations and maintained firm political control over NLA's two components: guerrilla units and uniformed formations. The more conventional-style units operated from sanctuaries in neighboring Arab countries. Both components were equipped with light weapons, but they were inferior to those of the French.

The NLF organized its political and military wings into compartmentalized cells whose members, except for cell chiefs, were unaware of each other's activities and identities. The chiefs served as links between two adjacent cells to coordinate activities. The typical "cell of three" included the henchman, in charge of a cell responsible for violent actions, pamphlets distribution, and contacts; the collector, in charge of a cell responsible for collecting revolutionary taxes established by the chief; and the chief, the only one in contact with other cell leaders and who received direction from higher authority and organized mission execution.

The NLA organized more than 30,000 fighters into units resembling regular army formations and stationed them in Moroccan and Tunisian sanctuaries. Thousands of part-time volunteers filled their ranks. When war erupted in 1954, the French faced a prepared organization ready to fight. By 1957, the NLA was a disciplined fighting force of 40,000 men.

**The four stages of the war.** A series of insurgent attacks on government targets during Algeria's All Saint's Day Celebration of 1 November 1954 started the war. The conflict unfolded in four phases:

- Phase I (1954-55) saw the spread and growth of the NLF.
- Phase II (1955-58) saw the rise of the NLF to shadow government status, as it successfully expanded its influence and control with a mix of terrorism and guerrilla tactics, although France rolled back NLF gains during brutal counterinsurgency warfare.

- Phase III (1958-61) saw French armed forces all but completely destroy the NLA in Algeria. However, as the military victory was being achieved, France began secret negotiations to grant Algeria independence. The NLA waited in sanctuaries for the outcome of the negotiations, while the NLF exiled itself to operate from Tunisia.

- Phase IV (1961-62) saw Algeria gain independence and a civil war break out between government forces supporting the NLF and die-hard supporters of French Algeria. This phase also saw a mass exodus of colonists, the slaughtering of indigenous Algerians who had previously fought alongside France, and the beginning of long-lasting tension in relations between the countries.

The seemingly unrelenting series of attacks that started the war killed noncombatants, destroyed property, and ignited outbursts of anger among the population. The police were unable to deal with the domestic upheaval by themselves because the terrorists conducted their campaign on a much grander scale than the French government had believed possible. Several thousand insurgents were involved, instead of the few hundred that some had anticipated. The NLF's terrorism campaign had moved beyond being a simple law-and-order problem. It had become a full-scale insurrection.

## Lines of Operations

Three lines of operations were clearly essential from a COIN lessons learned perspective:

- Maintaining the political will to support the conflict.
- Maintaining control of the population (the center of gravity for both sides).
- Destroying the political and military structure of the enemy at each stage of the conflict.

**Maintaining the political will to support the conflict.** One lesson the war broadly demonstrates is that a nation can win a war militarily and lose it strategically. France achieved an operational victory but suffered a strategic loss. If the goal of any war is to achieve a political end state, not merely defeat an armed adversary in the field, then the end state envisioned provides the framework that dictates every other aspect of the war. Clearly stated and achievable end states provide a unity of purpose and action that shapes the logistical, administrative, and diplomatic efforts necessary to wage the

war. An undefined, unclear, or wavering end state produces confusion and discord, making success of any kind unlikely.

France's desired end state changed three times in less than a decade. It shifted from attempting to maintain a two-tiered society dominated by ethnic European French (in place since 1848), to granting French citizenship to Muslims in 1958 to entice them to support France's retention of Algeria as French territory, to offering Muslims self-determination in 1960. The shifting end states sowed internal discord and ignited more chaos. "How to lose a military victory by the lack of a clear, stable political end state" might sum up the overall French Algerian war experience.

The first step in maintaining political will is to define—and then stick to—an obtainable political end state that provides hope to the population and undermines insurgent legitimacy. If the population does not "buy" the political project, the war is lost from the outset.

Obtaining a clear and stable political end state required maintaining the political will of the French government and people, and moving swiftly to

establish law and order in Algeria. Thus, high-priority parallel efforts sought to cultivate favorable domestic and international opinion.

The Algerian conflict demonstrated that a stable end state cannot come from an unstable political entity. Political instability paralyzed France during the Algerian conflict. Because it viewed Algeria as French territory, the French government initially tried to treat the conflict as a law-enforcement issue, but what began as a public-order operation rapidly grew into a full-scale war for which the Fourth Republic was unprepared. Algeria shook the Fourth Republic so vehemently that the government collapsed.

France's slow response to the conflict alienated the Algerian populace in greater numbers as the conflict widened, and those who were uncommitted initially later joined those who desired independence. The French government thus alienated those that offered the best hope to end the conflict on terms favorable to it. Meanwhile, the French public could not decide whether it was best to return Algeria to the pre-war status quo, negotiate for commonwealth status, or support the granting of



AP Photo

An estimated 40,000 people displaying French flags and signs that read: "French Algeria," "De Gaulle to Power," and "Long live Salan and the Army" jam the forum in front of the Government house in Algiers, 16 May 1958. General Raouf Salan was the French Military Commander in Algeria.

full independence. The political instability inherent within the French parliament led to a regime change in France itself in 1958.

The collapse of the Fourth Republic paved the way for still another change in the envisioned end state. General Charles de Gaulle returned to power in May 1958 and put an end to political stalemate that arose after a French military coup in Algiers. Spawned by perceived mishandling of the war, the coup sought to compel the government to keep Algeria a French territory. The Army presumed de Gaulle was committed to keeping Algeria a French territory and had an implicit, albeit vague, mandate to preserve French Algeria, but this proved not to be the case.

With hindsight, we can see that the Fourth Republic committed political suicide by giving de Gaulle complete authority. After he assumed power, a new constitution was written that granted him sweeping executive power to manage the conflict, and he came to believe that Algerian independence was inevitable, given world opinion and the anti-colonial tides. He initiated negotiations with the NLF that led to the Evian Accords of March 1962. However, de Gaulle's move toward negotiations did not proceed unopposed. Although the negotiations began in secret, right-wing elements of the French Army and colonialists soon learned of them and responded violently. In April 1961, French generals opposed to the negotiations attempted a military putsch. Shortly after negotiations concluded, opponents organized a campaign of bombings in Algeria in an attempt to block the accords' implementation.

In summary, France was paralyzed by the situation in Algeria. None of the branches of government had the power to manage the war efficiently or disengage from it on honorable terms. De Gaulle's popularity made him the only politician with enough public and political influence to end the war against the will of the military and colonists, but even de Gaulle had to take a series of steps to achieve his goal.

Getting France out of the Algerian quagmire was a prerequisite to completing European reconstruction, French modernization, and NATO integration, but de Gaulle appeared to believe that the NLF had to be soundly defeated before negotiations for independence could develop on terms favorable to France. As the situation evolved into open war,

some generals (including General Jacques Massu) in Algiers were given nearly free rein to deal with insurgents (as was evident during the Battle of Algiers when the Army began to search houses and detain civilians). The urgency of the situation inclined the armed forces under Massu to take on law enforcement duties. Untrained in police tactics, the Army's extremely heavy-handed methods turned public opinion against the French.

Promoting support for the conflict was difficult. The conflict had much greater immediate interest than the colonial war in Indochina. A million French citizens lived in Algeria, many with close links to friends and relatives in France, and Algeria was close by. The French population was more invested in Algeria and paid much closer attention to the situation there. Volunteers fought the war in Indochina, but two million draftees fought in the Algerian war. These factors spurred a decline in public support for the war.

In addition, the Communist Party, extreme leftist movements, journalists, and intellectuals (such as the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre) contested the legitimacy of the war and its prosecution. The undeniable use of torture was adamantly denounced and became a key issue undermining public confidence.

Both international communist activists who saw the war as imperialistic and Americans who viewed the struggle as playing into the hands of communists opposed the war. Their critiques converged to erode French public opinion and turned world public opinion against the war. The news media played a pivotal role in the process. Controversial photographs called into question the legitimacy of French actions.

The French employed PSYOP techniques developed and formalized during World War II to influence key Muslim populations. However, the

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PSYOP undercut their own aims in the world of ideas. Because the intellectually passionate people who formulate PSYOP are often wedded to ideologies and strong biases, operations formulated during chaotic emergencies can easily and inappropriately blur the distinction between legitimate military activity and partisan political advocacy. The French military's relatively unsupervised use of PSYOP served to polarize many formerly respected French officers politically, and may have influenced their opposition to their civilian leaders. After the war, PSYOP were taboo for a very long time in the French military establishment. The lesson learned: senior military leaders and their civilian masters must carefully circumscribe PSYOP and ensure proper civilian oversight of such activities.

**Maintaining control of the population.** The French had to convince Algeria's Muslims, the principal center of gravity in the conflict, that French control of Algeria guaranteed their security, that political and economic modernization was under way, and that Muslims representing their ethnic and national interests could gain political power. Unfortunately, the French did not fully understand the importance of these imperatives until it was too late to avoid chaos and war.

France eventually gained control of Algeria's Muslims, too much by force, but French sovereignty over Algeria was by that time a lost cause. Compared with other counterinsurgencies, the strength ratio for the French Algerian war was unusually favorable for the French. For every eight Muslims, there was one French citizen determined to keep Algeria French and willing to join or cooperate with French Forces (Zouave units manned by colonists). In addition, many Muslims initially favored continuing under French rule if they could become French citizens. This segment appeared to be growing until 1958, only to decline when agreement on self-determination took place.

Colonist actions calculated to slow down political and economic modernizations that favored Muslim aspirations for citizenship undermined any demographic advantage the French could have gained by granting Muslims equal rights. For example, France could not apply an ambitious 1954 modernization plan designed to garner Algerian Muslim support due to parliamentary opposition mainly engineered by colonial interests. Moreover, the government did

almost nothing to curtail or hold anyone accountable for brutal retaliations against Muslims for NLA terrorism. That many such attacks were never investigated, or even condemned, persuaded many Muslims that the French system of justice was never going to be applied equally to them, whatever their citizenship, and that their allegiance would get them nothing socially, politically, or economically.

To secure control over the population, the French methodically established security in one village after the next, trying to convince people the insurgency should be wiped out. They implemented a plan to destroy the rebels all over the country. This effort resulted in the reestablishment of security and law and order by 1958, as French forces uprooted NLF cadres and denied the insurgents control of both the physical and moral terrain in the towns and rural areas. The strategy of expanding influence and control required knowledge of the relationships and whereabouts of virtually everyone in the country.

To accomplish this, the French initiated a "totalitarian-like" urban protection program, designed and sponsored by Colonel Roger Trinquier, identifying family relationships through a careful and thorough census linked to a policy of security enforcement through family accountability. Under the program, traditional heads of every family were responsible for the movement and whereabouts of their kin. Family members were catalogued in small nuclear groups listed by houses, and then by extended family relationships within city blocks, districts, and regions. At each level, the French implemented security policy by making family leaders responsible for the whereabouts of every family member.

French leaders also understood the importance of population control. Because the conflict caused destruction and economic dislocations that aggravated poverty and worsened living conditions, the NLF began to alleviate such inequities and suffering to boost its appeal to the public. Its expanding shadow government was successful in providing services to areas under its de facto control.

When the French began uprooting and destroying NLF cadres and fighters, social problems deepened. To deal with them, the French developed and deployed special administrative sections (SAS), which they embedded in territorial units beginning in 1958. These SAS units divided rural areas where the government had neglected essential

services into grids and sectors and helped provide assistance and services that filled the vacuum left after NLF structures were destroyed. Modernization programs showed significant local success and helped establish order and population control, but they were launched too late to change the course of the conflict.

The French learned some important lessons from this failure, chief among them the importance of—

- Determining what has fueled popular support for the insurgency (often frustration over economic straits and lack of or poorly administered public services).

- Deploying SAS-like elements as early as possible in the conflict (while the population is still neutral toward the insurgency).

- Striking a balance between opportunistically promoting divisiveness and restoring order through reconciliation among indigenous groups.

Algeria's Muslim population had numerous fault lines—Berbers versus Arabs, towns against rural areas, the burgeoning middle class versus poor peasants, and the rift between insurgents and the so-called native *harkis* (collaborators) fighting in the French Army. The divisions the French had intentionally promoted were so deep that no reconciliation was possible once the civil war began in 1962. Among the consequences was a massive exodus of colonists to France and the slaughter of thousands of *harkis* (largely abandoned by France and considered traitors by the NLF).

Another lesson learned: the timely empowerment of the elite leader class helps create a sense of hope for the future among the people. But France waited too long to include the Muslim elite in the political process. France missed an opportunity to do this in 1945 when it jailed moderates rather than embrace a system that provided Muslims a path to French citizenship. When France finally offered citizenship to Muslims in 1958, it was nearly too late. The Muslim elite most likely to have embraced citizenship, for the most part, had either been slaughtered by NLF or had defected to it. France's lack of timely decisions created a political vacuum that the NLF and its supporters quickly filled.

**Destroying the insurgents' political and military structure.** Total destruction of insurgent military units and the uprooting of their political structures were essential intermediate steps to per-

manently control the population. Military organizational structure, management of intelligence, and rigorous use of COIN principles from the Indochina war were key factors in destroying the insurgency's political and military apparatus.

The French command and control structure in Algeria at the time was well suited for counterinsurgency. It duplicated the existing French system of civil administration to help ensure unity of command in support of operations. Algeria's three main sectors (*igamies*) corresponded to the three French Army corps, its 15 departments to France's 15 divisions, and its 72 districts (*arrondissements*) to 72 regiments.

French military units in Algeria were about 90 percent mobile and light infantry, capable and adaptable for fighting lightly armed insurgents. An army corps reserve on-call at the operational level supported them. Formations of indigenous troops reinforced every organizational level for intelligence and search-and-rescue operations. Some commando-type units were 100 percent Muslim. The NLF was especially wary of these units. After the war, many who remained loyal to France paid with their lives.

Modern-era force structure had to adapt to the guerrilla nature of the war. Army aviation employed lessons from Indochina. Ground units became heavily reliant on air assets for operational mobility and close air support. Twin-engine piston aircraft were called back into service to provide support because jets proved too fast and unwieldy to be effective. Some jet-trained pilots had to relearn how to fly the older aircraft. Ground forces reorganized into smaller, more flexible units, with firepower comparable to older regiments.

Both sides in the war identified the population as the center of gravity. Much of the fighting took place among the populace in which insurgents and terrorist elements freely mingled and were difficult to identify. Once French forces destroyed enemy forces, they had to hold and administer inhabited areas the enemy once controlled, not simply abandon them. Abandoned areas quickly fell into enemy hands. Anybody who had shown support for the French or who had remained neutral suffered the NLF's wrath. Revenge killings terrorized the remaining inhabitants into submission and discouraged cooperation with French forces.

Nevertheless, terrain control was important.

The policy of gathering rural populations into strategic hamlets left vacant areas where guerrillas could freely roam. French forces subjected the areas to intensive search-and-destroy operations. Harki commandos that spoke the languages and were familiar with the culture and terrain hounded the insurgents.

Victory also required destroying the insurgent shadow government. Once the French eliminated NLF military and political structures in a village, they built pro-French village governments and implemented programs to train self-defense forces to help provide security.

**Intelligence collection.** Intelligence collection presents special obstacles. In conventional circumstances, it generally involves interrogating uniformed enemies under the Law of Land Warfare as codified by international treaties. Insurgencies, however, usually involve terrorism and criminal activities. Finding enemies hidden among the population or among refugees who wear no uniforms is tricky. It is even trickier to separate criminals from legitimate combatants. The legal status of terrorists under law is separate from that of legitimate combatants (including non-uniformed forces openly carrying arms and not engaged in prohibited practices). This separate legal status offered an excuse to justify otherwise illegal methods.

The French used two methods of interrogation to collect intelligence—torture when they needed information quickly, and standard questioning when they did not. The police were completely overwhelmed and the situation was out of control. The pressure for timely information created by the intensive terrorist bombing campaign prompted General Massu to allow expedient torture methods. Torture was not used by every unit. Some of them refused to do it. Some who had been tortured by the Gestapo accepted it as unavoidable, whereas others who had suffered the same horrid experience did not accept it. French political authorities covertly supported the decision to use torture.

Torturing people produced good short-term results. Following the torture sessions, a thorough and relentless analysis unveiled NLF/NLA organizations cell by cell, and these in turn were systematically taken down. Torturing suspects proved instrumental to short-term military success and helped destroy the NLF. Yet, public revelations

that French forces had used torture had catastrophic strategic consequences. Torture was not strategically efficient from a COIN perspective. It had long-lasting negative moral and psychological effects on the population involved and on France's own soldiers and citizens. In practice, its moral corrosiveness proved unconstructive.

In summary, intelligence collection in Algeria hinged upon effective population control techniques. These required—

- A good census.
- The use of indigenous people to infiltrate cells.
- Effective interrogation that included torture if necessary.

However, the interrogations crossed the line into morally and strategically corrosive actions that proved harmful in the long term. Nevertheless, actions stemming from such intelligence were largely successful in the short term because they forced the Muslim population into obedience.

The French special services engineers were able to induce savage domestic killings inside the NLF itself. They did so through manipulating information introduced by agents who had successfully infiltrated cells.

France defeated NLF military formations using four sub-lines of operations:

- Cutting external support from neighboring countries.
- Prevailing in urban warfare that resulted in the NLF losing control of the cities.
- Prevailing in rural areas, in part by fostering civil defense organizations within outlying villages.
- Using successful search-and-destroy techniques in sweeps of refugee areas.

NLA regular formations relied on Tunisia and Morocco for refuge. Tunisia also harbored bases for staging cross-border attacks and preparing supply missions for urban guerrillas. To cut off commu-

***The French used two methods of interrogation to collect intelligence—torture when they needed information quickly, and standard questioning when they did not.***



AP Photo

Muslim women and men carry the new nation's flag as they celebrate in the streets of Oran, Algeria, on 3 July 1962, during a liberation parade after 132 years of French rule.

nication and supply routes, the French constructed the Morice Line, a 200 mile-long barrier along the Tunisian border that combined a fence and mobile, mechanized search-and-destroy units supported by artillery and complemented by weapons searches at seaports and airfields.

These measures later taught the French to use covert actions, if possible, against nations supporting insurgencies or terrorist groups. Such secrecy helps minimize outside criticism and political pressure. The French used covert operations to destroy shipments of weapons and neutralize support to the NLF.

In Algeria, the control of urban areas represented legitimacy. In pursuit of such legitimacy, the NLF exerted administrative control over urban centers while simultaneously undermining the government's authority by disrupting security and essential services. To defeat the NLF, the French government had to seize and control those areas while also defeating the NLF's shadow government.

General Massu assumed command of an ad hoc, *in extremis* force of police and armed forces and was granted domestic law enforcement authority for unity of command. Once assembled, the force began using previously collected census data to help formulate courses of action against the insurgents. Two battles for Algiers began.

## The Battles for Algiers

In response to the threat of a general strike on 7 January 1957, the prefect of Algiers gave Massu's forces police powers normally kept within the hands of civilian authorities.

In the first Battle of Algiers, the French broke up the strike organized by the NLF, initiated population control measures, and engaged in land warfare using patrols, cordon and search operations, and check points supported by NLF defectors. Meanwhile, covert operatives concurrently destroyed enemy networks.

Within a few weeks, France destroyed NLF's political and military structures, dismantled its bomb network, and killed or neutralized 1,827 *fellaghas* (outlaws), including 253 killers and approximately 200 terrorists. During these stabilization actions, French forces suffered only two dead and five wounded—a resounding victory on its face. The key factors for military success in the battle were—

- Declaration of a state of emergency that empowered Massu with police authority to search homes and to detain people.
- Unity and freedom of action of the armed forces, the administration, the police and of all services, including those that were secret.
- Population control through the census.
- Effective intelligence gathered through infiltration.

- Destruction of terrorist networks.
- The use of mass interrogation techniques.
- The use of grids that cut up the Casbah like a cake.

Unfortunately, the successes in population control did not last. The NLF rebuilt its organization quickly, requiring France to engage in a second battle of Algiers to eradicate the enemy once again.

The second battle was more like a police operation; it required the support of only one airborne regiment. Success came largely from a disinformation campaign conceived and promoted by Captain Paul-Alain Leger in which agents infiltrated into the NLF and introduced rumors that created a tide of destructive suspicion and internal violence in NLF covert networks. The disinformation campaign convinced the NLF to execute a large number of suspected traitors within its ranks.

The French used harsh measures to secure Algiers and other urban centers, but this tactical success came at a high strategic and moral price. Some of the tactics used to wage the battle converted the victory into a moral disaster, with long-lasting negative effects on public support.

## Conclusion

The study of the French-Algerian War is useful to contemporary students of counterinsurgency and revolutionary warfare. Its history reveals many of the same root sources of conflict and the same complexities found in the current global security situation. The lingering traditions, expectations, and policies of a past colonial power were the source of the conflict. Was the war winnable if France had handled matters more realistically from a political point of view?

One important lesson that emerges from the conflict is that a clear political end state is essential to shape all aspects of conducting such a war: if the end state is not clear, the use of force is often wasteful at best, and at worst, corrosive. In addition, the conflict highlighted the need to balance the use of force with measures aimed at winning the population's hearts and minds. France eventually controlled the population, but never really won it completely over to its cause. French forces

did much to alleviate the suffering inflicted on the population during search-and-destroy operations, but the use of brutal methods to obtain intelligence (i.e. torture or threats of violence) only traumatized the Muslim population into obedience and alienated them from France in the end. The morale and technical problems of mass interrogation marred France's conduct of the war and remain in many ways unresolved.

A final lesson from the war is that in any COIN environment, it is likely that the old order is irretrievably gone; the conflict represents the birth of a new order, not an opportunity to return to an old order; and success depends on accepting, adapting, and shaping, not attempting to turn back the clock.

Key principles learned from the conflict still shape French Army operations today. These include recognition of the need to—

- Give a high degree of operational autonomy to units operating in such an environment.
- Require that units maintain close contact with the population to foster understanding and avoid alienation and loss of objective focus.
- Train indigenous troops to ensure loyalty to the cause and freedom of action for the force.

France continues to apply lessons learned from the French-Algerian experience throughout Africa and elsewhere four decades after the conflict in which they were learned.

The Algerian War left behind a mixed legacy in the French Army. It involved two military coups and brutal methods of intelligence collection, and it caused misunderstanding between politicians and segments of the military brought on by differing agendas during the prosecution of the war.

Finally, because Algeria obtained its independence in the midst of a civil war that took many years to settle, it has had a very complex and chaotic relationship with France, one of both hatred and love. The page is being turned right now for the best for the future of France and Algeria. **MR**

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## NOTES

1. Library of Congress country study, Algeria.
2. The Islamic component of the Algerian insurgency should not be confused with the fundamentalist Islamic movements calling for Islamic rule in governments which exist today, and against which the modern NLF also fought fiercely in the 1990s.