The Algerian War of Independence: guerrilla war and decolonization

The Algerian War, 1954–62, as an example of a 20th-century guerrilla war, highlights many significant historic developments. First, the war is partially a response to the colonial policies of France and as such helps illustrate the relationship between nationalism, imperialism, decolonization and warfare in the 20th century with its profound effects on both Algeria and France. In this section we also examine the strategy and tactics involved in fighting guerrilla wars for both the guerrilla and regular forces, and in so doing explore the brutal nature of this type of warfare for all those involved, including non-combatants.

Guerrilla war

Guerrilla comes from the Spanish word for “little war” and was originally applied to the Spanish resistance to Napoleon’s occupation of that country in the early 19th century. It generally involves irregular forces involved in an ongoing struggle with an established regular army. Tactical, strategic and political goals are all closely related in most guerrilla movements.

“Irregular” refers to forces that are not widely recognized as belonging to official, full-time, professional armies. Guerrilla soldiers can be farmers or workers one moment and fighters the next. They seldom wear uniforms, nor are they concentrated in any identifiable base. Guerrilla units are generally small and restrict themselves to “hit and run” engagements. As it achieves success, a guerrilla movement may grow in both strength and organization and by the end of the struggle may appear very similar to a regular army. Such was the case in China and Vietnam. Mao Zedong wrote of guerrilla war as a process or continuum, which starts small and in its later phases grows in size and sophistication.

Guerrilla strategy varies depending on the movement’s political goals. Many of the late 20th-century guerrilla movements have concentrated on national independence or liberation, generally from European colonial control. In these cases, the overall strategy is one of endurance and nuisance. Guerrilla forces will not engage in the kind of decisive battle that will bring about its demise, but instead harass the enemy until the cost of pursuing the war is no longer worth the benefits and the occupying power withdraws. Relying as they do on the support, coerced or voluntary, of local populations and not depending on a formal military training, guerrilla armies enjoy a seemingly limitless supply of potential soldiers. This advantage can be pushed to a logical though awful extreme with the conscription of child soldiers. Chief among the weaknesses inherent in guerrilla movements is a difficulty in obtaining an adequate supply of modern weapons. This was often overcome in the second half of the 20th century with the sponsorship of guerrilla movements by larger, wealthier states—rather ironic for those guerrilla forces bent on national liberation.
Guerrilla tactics rely on mobility and stealth. Attacks are generally designed to strike and withdraw before the strength of the conventional forces of the enemy can be brought to bear on the fewer and more lightly armed guerrillas. Because guerrilla forces are often indistinguishable from the general population, the psychological strain on enemy forces can be overwhelming. This, in fact, is one of the key strengths of guerrilla tactics, but can also lead to horrific atrocities on the part of the regular force against civilians suspected of guerrilla activity. Supply and logistics for guerrilla forces are simplified by the small size of the units involved. Many guerrilla units live off what they can take from or are given by the general population. Recognizing this fact, many anti-guerrilla tactics involve restricting access to such support, which again can lead to added hardship on non-combatants.

Though forms of guerrilla war have been practiced since the 19th century, it seemed to reach a zenith with the victory of Mao’s people’s army over the Chinese Nationalists in 1949. Ever since Mao so ably mobilized his meager resources to conquer and rule the third largest country in the world, using a well-honed guerrilla doctrine, independence movements have been trying to emulate his example. This approach enjoyed a period of concentrated success in the period of mid-20th century decolonization—a success that has been difficult to duplicate since. A fine example of the success of guerrilla movements against European colonizers can be found in the Algerian War of Independence, often referred to simply as the Algerian War.

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<th>Twenty-first-century guerrilla wars</th>
<th>Guerillas</th>
<th>Opponents</th>
<th>Result</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Civil War, 1922–49</td>
<td>Communists</td>
<td>Nationalists</td>
<td>Communists gained more and more support, transforming the war into more of a conventional war. The communists won in 1949.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Indochina War, 1945–54</td>
<td>Viet Minh</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>The Viet Minh forced the French colonial administration to quit the country in 1954.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vietnam War, 1965–73</td>
<td>Viet Cong</td>
<td>USA, South Vietnamese army</td>
<td>With the help of regular soldiers from North Vietnam, the Viet Cong were able to force the USA from the country in 1973 and then defeated the South Vietnamese army in 1975.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Algerian War, 1954–62</td>
<td>FLN</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>After a bloody war, Algeria declared independence in 1962 with the FLN forming the new government.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Afghan Resistance, 1979–89</td>
<td>Mujahadeen</td>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>With American aid and after ten years of guerrilla fighting, the Mujahadeen forced the Soviets from Afghanistan. This led to a civil war between Mujahadeen factions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indonesian War of Independence, 1945–49</td>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>After four years of negotiation and fighting, the Netherlands recognized the independence of Indonesia.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mau Mau Uprising (Kenya), 1952–60</td>
<td>Mau Mau (KCA)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Although intensely violent, the revolt collapsed. Eventually the British administration would recognize an independent Kenya.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malaysian Insurgency, 1948–57</td>
<td>MNLA</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>The guerrilla campaign was not widely supported and was defeated by the British army. The UK recognized an independent Malaysia of its own accord in 1957.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuban Revolution, 1957–9</td>
<td>26th of July Movement</td>
<td>Cuban national army</td>
<td>After a progressively more successful military campaign, Castro’s guerrillas were able to force the surrender of the government forces.</td>
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Causes of the Algerian War

Algeria had become a French colonial possession through a series of military campaigns during the 1830s and 1840s. As France exerted more and more control over the territory, floods of European settlers came to take advantage of cheap land and job opportunities. Successive French governments aimed to assimilate Algeria both administratively and culturally, attempting to make it an integral part of France. As the process of assimilation brought more European technology and investment, it also attracted more settlers throughout the late 19th century. Some natives resisted the assimilation with guerrilla-style attacks on French troops and European settlers. The combination of the military campaigns and the European settlement with its accompanying European illnesses meant that, by the 1870s, the native population of Algeria was declining while the settler population was increasing. Economic inequalities aggravated Muslim discontent with the colonial regime. By the time the war broke out, 75 per cent of the Muslim population was illiterate in Arabic. Unemployment among Algerian Muslims ran to over a million, with twice that number underemployed. In many ways, this pattern of colonization and resistance can be seen as both a long-term cause of the Algerian War and the rationale for the guerrilla tactics employed.

The first half of the 20th century would expose French society to both a disastrous victory and a humiliating defeat and occupation in the two world wars. The social consequences of these wars is reflected in the contradictory impulses of the French government and French society at large. On the one hand, there was a desire to break with the past and reject the values and systems that had brought France to the brink of destruction. But there was also a desire to recapture the glory, influence and power of France in the 19th century. These contradictory impulses were evident in French colonial policy in the post-Second World War era. The desire to reject the past was manifest in the granting of independence to Tunisia and Morocco with relatively little friction in the mid-1950s. A longing for the past was seen in the ferocity with which the French tried to maintain control of their Indo-Chinese holdings and Algeria.

The end of the Second World War can be seen as providing a more immediate cause of the Algerian War, although it preceded the outbreak by nine years. Celebrations marking the surrender of Nazi Germany in May 1945 turned violent when Algerian nationalists staged demonstrations and were in turn confronted by European settlers, generally referred to as pieds-noirs. When the violence subsided some weeks later, 6000 people—Muslim, pieds-noirs and French soldiers—were dead.

This event revealed the three sides that would become involved in the Algerian War nine years later, the French government, the pieds-noirs and Algerian nationalists, of which there were a number of organizations. Although for the most part the French army would be the strong arm of the French government, there were times when it acted as a fourth side, protecting its own interests at the expense of the government's orders. The brutality and violence of the 1945 riots anticipated the viciousness of the war to come.
The Algerian nationalist movement was, as many such nationalist movements, fractured by method and goal. The Union Démocratique du Manifeste Algérien (UDMA) sought negotiated equality and autonomy within a French state. The older strand of nationalism, the Ulema, favoured statehood based on traditional Islamic law. A hybrid of these two visions found expression in the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD) after 1945, which combined a reverence for traditional Islam, a left-wing social agenda and complete independence from France. It was from the MTLD that the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), led by Ahmed Ben Bella, would emerge, eventually encompassing most Algerian nationalist aspirations. These aspirations were fuelled by poor economic conditions for Algerian Arabs, income differentials and the accompanying inaccessibility of landownership.

Outside influences also played a role in the timing of the outbreak of hostilities in 1954. Mao's example only grew in luster, having taken control of China in 1949 and, three years later, fighting the United States to a standstill in Korea. It seemed as though anything might be possible. The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and their subsequent withdrawal from Indochina also seemed to present a historic opportunity for Algerian nationalists. Although there had been guerrilla-style attacks throughout the French occupation of Algeria, the FLN began to plan a marked increase in co-ordinated attacks shortly after the French military disaster at Dien Bien Phu, even though there were very few similarities between the two causes or situations.

- Unlike the Viet Minh, the FLN did not have any particular ideological orientation.
- While the Viet Minh enjoyed the sponsorship of a major power, China, the FLN had no such aid.
- While Indochina was geographically remote from France and thus more difficult to support, Algeria was close.
- French law prohibited the use of conscripts in Indochina, but there were no such restrictions on the use of French conscripts in Algeria.

Nevertheless, the FLN judged the time to be right and on 1 November 1954 it conducted a number of co-ordinated bomb attacks across Algeria. This marks the start of the Algerian War.
Advantages and disadvantages of conscription

### Advantages
- Increases the pool from which to draw soldiers
- Makes the size of the army predictable
- Can spread the burden of military service across social classes and groups
- Can integrate the military into society more thoroughly
- Increases civil participation and sense of civic responsibility

### Disadvantages
- Soldiers may lack motivation
- Subjects the military to all the social factions in a country
- Can breed resentment in the population as a whole as a form of governmental control and interference
- Military losses are felt throughout the population
- Constant turnover of troops can make training expensive
- Requires close cooperation between military and civilian authorities

Practices

Lacking a major sponsor state and the weapons that such a state could supply, the FLN was limited to small actions, bombings of infrastructure mostly, throughout 1954 and into 1955. The French had no such limitations. The government in Paris made it clear that Algeria was part of France and would remain so. To that end, the French bolstered its military presence in Algeria, sending paratroopers and Legionnaires who then conducted a campaign of assassination and retaliation against suspected FLN supporters. This campaign bit deep into the FLN leadership. As in most guerrilla wars, a brutal pattern emerged in Algeria during 1955. FLN attacks would provoke retaliatory attacks by the French army, who would use vicious tactics both to discourage civilian support for the FLN and to obtain information about their activities. In an effort to coerce such support, the FLN would put often brutal pressure on Algerian civilians and terrorize the pieds-noirs. It was on non-combatants that much of the hardship of this and other guerrilla wars fell.

This was made evident in August 1955 when a unit of FLN guerrillas descended on the city of Philippeville. By the time the guerrillas had left, 123 civilians, Muslim and pieds-noirs, had been murdered. The retaliation of the French military claimed 1200 victims by its own estimates, 12 000 by outside estimates. This type of retaliation was an example of the principle of collective responsibility adopted by both French and FLN forces throughout the war and designed to discourage support for the enemy. Again, it was the civilians that bore the brunt of it. Because the violence was meted out by both sides and fell on both European and Algerian populations, the Philippeville massacres and aftermath radicalized the moderates on both sides. Pied-noir gangs conducted their own terror campaigns against Algerians, who in turn joined the FLN in greater numbers.

The French administration intensified its efforts throughout Algeria during 1956. It moved those suspected of actively supporting the FLN, sometimes whole villages, and imprisoned leaders, while at the same time implementing limited economic reforms to alleviate some grievances. This approach was supplemented by an aggressive military campaign in which Foreign Legionnaires and paratroops used helicopter transport to move into remote areas and root out FLN fighters, a tactic that the United States would adopt in Vietnam ten years later. Helicopters, it seemed, allowed anti-guerrilla forces to rely

Legionnaires Soldiers in the French Foreign Legion, an elite formation within the French army. The Legion, created in the 1830s, accepts volunteers from foreign states, but also contains substantial numbers of French citizens.

Collective responsibility The practice of holding all members of a population responsible for the actions of a few of its members.

IB Learner Profile link
Reflective

Under what circumstances would you support your country's decision to go to war?
Do you support conscription?
less on infrastructure such as roads and thereby removed a major guerrilla target. In some ways, their use gave to the regular force the mobility previously enjoyed only by the guerrillas.

The FLN continued to be plagued by supply issues, despite receiving some support from Nasser’s government in Egypt. By the end of 1956, however, French military strength in Algeria reached 500,000. This coordinated approach dealt a significant blow to the FLN, which lost over half its fighting strength during that year. France was using half a million soldiers to conduct operations against a force of about 30,000 irregular, guerrilla fighters. The question became, as in all occupations, which side could last longer, in terms both of sustaining adequate material support and the will to continue the war.

In 1957, the FLN moved the war to the cities, most notably to the capital, Algiers. The “Battle of Algiers” was more a series of terror attacks by FLN guerrillas, including women, and reprisals by the French military. By moving the war to the cities, the FLN leadership hoped to gain more international attention and support. The danger in such a move is that it is harder to hide in a city because you need the support of more people. The possibility of betrayal is far greater in the city. The French used this fact against the FLN by terrorizing the population and using torture to extract information, eventually rooting out most FLN fighters in Algiers. As the French military began to rely more on torture, and as this fact became known in France, French public opinion began to turn against the war.

When France granted independence to Morocco and Tunisia in 1956 and 1957, it inadvertently supplied the FLN with a valuable resource—a place to hide. To neutralize this resource, the French military constructed a barrier between Tunisia and Algeria. The Morice Line, as it became known, consisted of an electrified fence, reinforced with anti-personnel mines, artillery and 80,000 soldiers patrolling its length. A similar line attempted to insulate Algeria from Morocco. Despite the complexity of the line, the FLN would launch attacks from the Tunisian and Moroccan side of the lines. One such attack led to a French air strike on the Tunisian town of Sakiet. The FLN continued to build up a significant conventional military

Activity:

Attrition and guerrilla wars

Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Viet Minh forces and later North Vietnam in its struggle against France and the United States, once said:

You can kill ten of my men for every one of yours I kill, but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.

1. Explain why Ho thought this to be true.

2. What disadvantages for the guerrilla forces are involved in pursuing a strategy of attrition?

3. Is Ho’s statement valid for all guerrilla wars? Why or why not?

4. Research two other guerrilla wars, each taken from a different region. Does Ho’s claim apply to these conflicts?

Attrition In military terms, the doctrine that seeks to weaken the enemy by depleting and destroying their resources, human and material, to the point that they surrender or otherwise abandon the fight.
force behind the Morice Line and, although it never played a significant role in the war itself, it posed the question of whether the Morice Line and the accompanying French military force would need to be permanent. Again, France was faced with the question of whether or not Algeria was worth such an ongoing effort.

The presence of sympathetic border countries is a dilemma faced by many counter-insurgency efforts. The Ho-Chi-Minh trail in Vietnam that ran from North Vietnam to South Vietnam through neighbouring Laos and Cambodia would frustrate the American effort throughout the war and lead to the disastrous invasion of Cambodia in 1971. Even in the early 21st century, such refuge has played a significant role in the conflicts in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Efforts to deal with such support always carry with them the danger of widening the war.

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<th>Foreign support for guerrillas</th>
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<td>War</td>
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<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
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<td>Vietnam</td>
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<td>Afghanistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nicaragua, 1974–9</td>
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<td>Nicaragua, 1981–7</td>
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<td>Pakistan</td>
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Guerrilla campaigns traditionally wed military and political goals. The degree to which the political fate of France was tied to the insurgency in Algeria was clearly illustrated in May 1958. After the fall of the government in Paris and before a new one could be formed, the pieds-noirs and leading military commanders in Algiers conspired to take control of the civil administration of Algeria. The conspiracy was not restricted to Algeria. An important component of the rebel generals’ plan, and what they said would stave off further action on their part, was the political resurrection of Charles de Gaulle. De Gaulle was seen by many as a force of political stability. The army trusted him as a former military man. At that point, the pieds-noirs trusted him as a leader who believed that Algeria should remain under French control. In France the left and right trusted him as someone who would put the best interests of France ahead of political squabbling. De Gaulle, however, was himself circumspect about what he believed those interests to be. A new constitution

Discussion point: torture in a democracy

Alan Dershowitz, a high-profile legal scholar, has made the argument that the limited use of torture can be necessary in democratic states.

If torture is going to be administered as a last resort in the ticking-bomb case, to save enormous numbers of lives, it ought to be done openly, with accountability, with approval by the president of the United States or by a Supreme Court justice.


1. What does Dershowitz mean by a “ticking-bomb case”?
2. Do you agree with Dershowitz? Why or why not?
3. Would Dershowitz advocate a similar use of torture by authoritarian regimes? Why or why not?
4. Does his justification for torture apply to the French in Algeria?
brought about the birth of the French Fifth Republic and with it de Gaulle as president.

A new French military commander, Maurice Challe, and renewed efforts brought FLN forces in Algeria to the brink of destruction throughout 1959. Despite its weakness in Algeria, the FLN continued to launch terrorist attacks in France, making the cost of the war more evident to French civilians. Throughout the war there were some 42,000 terrorist attacks in France, claiming 2,800 civilian lives. Such attacks affected de Gaulle, who appears to have seen Challe’s victory over the FLN in the field as a temporary success in an endless conflict. De Gaulle was also acutely aware that since 1945 the process of decolonization was accelerating around the world and that, as a result, the age of European colonialism was waning. He decided to put the issue of Algerian independence or self-determination to a referendum, in both France and Algeria. Believing de Gaulle had betrayed them, pieds-noirs set up barricades in the streets and Challe refused to take action against them. The pieds-noirs took them down of their own accord a week later. The referendum passed and, to the horror of the French military commanders in Algeria and the pieds-noirs, de Gaulle set about negotiating the future of an Algerian state. This development illustrates an important point about guerrilla war in the cause of national independence. Even though the insurgency seemed near defeat, it was the prospect of it flaring up after a period of dormancy that frightened de Gaulle and the rest of France. This was especially threatening given the military presence of the FLN in Tunisia. As Henry Kissinger would later say, “A conventional army loses if it does not win. A guerrilla army wins if it does not lose.” De Gaulle understood this and determined that Algeria was not worth the cost. For de Gaulle that cost appeared to be a never-ending guerrilla war.

There were still difficult negotiations ahead. Complicating matters was the fact that the FLN did not, in the end, speak for all Algerian nationalists, a fact further complicated by the hundreds of thousands of Algerian Muslims who remained, in varying degrees, loyal to France, including some 60,000 who served in the French military. With the support of the pieds-noirs, the military staged a short-lived coup in Algiers in 1961, though not it seems with the support of much of the conscripted rank and file of the army. Finally, in 1961, desperate pieds-noirs and some military officers formed a deadly terrorist organization known as the Organisation de l'armée secrète (OAS). The OAS conducted bomb attacks and shootings throughout Algeria and France until 1962, with both Algerian Muslims and the French army as their targets.

Jacques Massu (1908–2002)

Massu was the commander of the elite 10th Parachute Division stationed in Algeria. Massu had a reputation for ferocity and determination, especially after the Battle of Algiers, where he authorized and encouraged the use of torture and other coercive tactics. He was later dismissed after publicly criticizing government policy in 1961.

Decolonization The global movement in the second half of the 20th century toward independence for territories that had been ruled as colonies of European states. The movement was especially prevalent in South Asia and Africa during this period. Decolonization could be accomplished by either peaceful or violent means.

French paratroopers clear houses during the Battle of Algiers. Fighting a guerrilla war in an urban setting is different to fighting in the field. What comparative advantages and disadvantages does fighting in an urban setting have for both sides in a guerrilla war?
Effects
As in all wars, the most immediate effect was in the form of casualties. Counting the dead is a difficult and political task in all wars and becomes especially difficult in a guerrilla war. Guerrilla armies seldom keep accurate records of troop strength for security reasons, which makes counting the dead far from easy. It is in the interests of both sides to under-report their own casualties and over-report those of the enemy for morale and propaganda purposes. There can also be propaganda value in over-reporting the civilian casualties caused by the enemy. Counting civilian deaths is likewise a challenge and even more so in a guerrilla conflict when the line between civilian and soldier is, by definition, blurred. Accurate census data is necessary and this not always available.

Algeria, by all accounts, was a brutal and costly conflict. Estimates range from 500 000 to one million deaths. According to their records, the French military lost 18 000 dead and 53 000 wounded in the years 1954–62. When the FLN came to power in 1962, it conducted a campaign of retribution against those Muslims who it suspected had remained loyal to the French regime during and after the war. Estimates put the fatalities of this campaign at 150 000.

After the Evian Accords ended the fighting in 1962, there was a mass migration of pieds-noirs and loyal Algerians (harkis). Fear of FLN reprisals forced many to choose “the suitcase or the coffin”, as many put it at the time. Close to a million pieds-noirs fled to France in the wake of the FLN victory, putting a significant strain on French society in terms of housing and social programs. Some 90 000 harkis also fled to France.

The legacy of the Algerian War is ambiguous. For some, it stands as an example of the power of guerrilla war in the cause of national liberation. For others, it stands for the brutality that guerrilla war can engender in both sides.

Charles de Gaulle (1890–1970)
Charles de Gaulle was a soldier, politician and statesman in France. When successive governments of the Fourth Republic could not manage the Algerian War, he came back to French politics after a 12-year hiatus and founded the Fifth Republic, in which he served as president. Both pieds-noirs and the army saw him as a man of honesty and integrity and supportive of their position. Once in power, however, de Gaulle soon came to believe that a stable France that included Algeria was not viable. He began talks, first secret and later public, with the FLN and negotiated the cease-fire agreement and later the final agreement setting out Algerian independence. For his troubles, de Gaulle survived a number of assassination attempts.

Maurice Challe (1905–79)
Maurice Challe took command of all French forces in Algeria in 1959. He organized a successful campaign against the FLN, virtually driving them from Algeria by the end of the year. Challe sided with the pieds-noirs when it looked as though de Gaulle would favour Algerian independence, eventually taking part in the revolt of the generals in 1961, for which he served five years in prison. He was pardoned by de Gaulle in 1968.

Evian Accords An agreement, signed on 18 March 1962 between the French government and the FLN. The agreement established a permanent ceasefire in the Algerian War and the removal of French forces. It guaranteed the religious and property rights of French citizens who remained in an independent Algeria. The Evian Accords were approved by an overwhelming percentage of French citizens in a referendum held in April 1962.

Harkis Algerian Muslims who fought for the French during the Algerian War.