Guerrilla Warfare and its Role during the “Heroic Years” of the Algerian War

By Sarah Hanafi

1. The Algerian War of Independence, and the tactics employed by both sides throughout the conflict, influenced the wars that would follow, such as that of Vietnam. One of its hallmarks was its extensive use of guerrilla warfare, but to what extent was this unique combat tactic truly central to the nationalist cause and its success? The early period of the National Liberation Front (FLN) between the years of 1954 and 1957 is often referred to as the “heroic years”, and is characterised by extreme hardship and seemingly miraculous survival. Through the combination of guerrilla warfare tactics, the polarisation of the Algerian communities, and political allure, the FLN managed to not only survive but succeed during this historic period.

2. The organisation made its first appearance on 1st November, 1954, as they claimed responsibility for coordinated bombings and assaults throughout the country and, in particular, Algiers. Its collective leadership was in the hands of nationalists Hocine Ait Ahmed, Ahmed Ben Bella, Mostafa Ben Boulaïd, Larbi Ben M’hidi, Rabah Bitat, Mohamed Bouadif, Mourad Didouche, Mohamed Khider, and Belkacem Krim. The FLN established five wilayats, or military zones, each to be headed by a designated leader. As an underground group, the FLN faced severe arms shortages, having fewer than four hundred firearms. Despite the very harsh winter of 1954 and 1955 wherein Didouche died, Boulaid and Bitat were imprisoned, and the guerrilla networks deteriorated into ruins, the FLN surprisingly survived. How does one explain this seemingly miraculous survival of the nationalist independence movement? Many point to the use of revolutionary tactics – namely, guerrilla warfare.

3. Algerian geography is especially well suited to guerrilla warfare. The nation has a vast and varied terrain, from the mountain summits of over two thousand metres in the Aurès and the Djurdjura, to the High Plateaux; the landscape is remarkably different from region to region. In Kabylia, lush valleys of the Soummam region juxtapose the mountainous surroundings interspersed with openings to the Mediterranean Sea. Across the nation there are wild and undiscovered pockets very suitable for the hiding of a clandestine resistance movement. Unsurprisingly, the first wilaya, the Aurès, came to be the group’s ideal location for a “safe base” due to the mountainous terrain and was vital to the organisation’s survival. The majority of the leaders were from Kabylia and the Aurès, while most of the militants were peasants and, thus knew the territory inside-out. This put the French government at a disadvantage, as they were unfamiliar with the regions in comparison to the guerrilla militants. Furthermore, the French believed to have “pacified” the Kabylia region; this afforded some protection to the guerrilla
fighters hiding in the area. The geography secured the secrecy of the FLN, and enabled the militants to attack French bases and make off with weapons to power their resistance until arms could be obtained from sources abroad via the “exterior” part of the organisation.

4. This “exterior” section of the organisation was central to the success and sustenance of the guerrilla networks. The FLN was strongly modelled after the French Resistance of World War II. Due to the ‘pied noir’ reprisals, the absenteeism of strong French political reaction, and the appealing aim of complete independence by the FLN, the organisation managed to garner popular support by mid-1956 with the absorption of alternative political parties such as the MNA, the Algerian Communist Party (PCA), and the Union Démocratique du Manifesto Algérie (UDMA). The FLN movement thus achieved an active strength of 20 000 organised into the Army of National Liberation (ALN), eventually taking the form of a regular army organised in exile in Tunisia (having itself received independence from France on 20th March 1956). Morocco also gained independence on 2nd March, 1956, and it was with the aid of its independent neighbours that Algerian nationalists were able to launch attacks on the French from these countries and air its own clandestine radio station, La Voix d’Algérie, via Cairo.

5. Nonetheless, support was also needed from the “interior”, and the hosting peasant populations often provided it. The FLN bands occupying villages – particularly in Kabylia, (Wilaya IV) – subjected the very susceptible poor fellah to pressure and blackmail in order to obtain money from the locals to fund the organisation’s activities. According to Jean Servier in 1956, there was a “terrible silence” in the Kabyle village he visited. Each village was held in fee to the local FLN representative to collect “taxes” and food supplied for the alternative government. According to Mouloud Feraoun’s journals, a Kabyle schoolteacher, the situation was “truly terror, as each of [them] is guilty just because he belongs to such a category, such a race, such a people.” The FLN also killed all moderates that would potentially serve as a mediatory or bridging role in the war, and thus imposed an extreme state of terror on the local population. Added to this was the intense warfare between the FLN and Messali Hadj’s National Algerian Movement (Mouvement Nationaliste Algérien, MNA) in Kabylia, as the MNA attempted to regain political support in the region. From the autumn of 1954 up until the summer of 1956, the FLN largely depended on rural guerrilla warfare and the organisation of local populations in the more rugged and inaccessible wilayas such as Kabylia and the Aurès. By terrorising the rural populations, the FLN secured control in the regions that would benefit it the most.

6. However, other viewpoints suggest that the population was not terrorised; instead, the FLN had installed an alternative form of government that was organised with judiciary systems and a head leader, as well as several central services such as social services and health care by November 1957. The organisation was able to obtain the goods it needed such as food and money from the supporting peasants, ensuring the FLN’s survival during its upstart. Due to the belief of baraka
in Islam, the FLN gained greater support from the Muslim community because the group’s remarkable survival through the harsh winter was deemed by some as “God’s will.”

7. Considering the grand scale of the French army, it is unwise to deem the FLN’s guerrilla warfare as the reason for success; rather, the guerrilla tactics only allowed the organisation to barely get by. The French military was incomparably superior to the FLN’s military sector, but it was the inability of the French to completely quell the sporadic low-intensity attacks that ensured the revolution’s continuation and survival.

8. Equally contributory to the movement’s success was its ability to polarise communities and its political appeal. At the outset of the Algerian War, most people were of mixed sentiment and did not have a firm stance on the issue. Many implicated in the independence movement had complex identities, which served to further complicate matters. With the polarisation of political opinion, the FLN managed to increase their number of adherents. The organisation had major recruitment successes in 1955 as the French provoked anger from the oppressed population with the excessive intensity of its repressive measures. A good example of this is the French military’s reaction to the uprising by thousands of Algerian peasants, or *fellahs*, on 20th August, 1955, which was initiated by the head of the FLN’s *wilaya* of Constantine. Possibilities of French political reforms that would integrate the Muslim population were then abandoned in order to revenge the killing of 123 *pied noirs* in Philippeville. Reminiscent of the Sétif massacre of 1945, the French military set to work forming private militias, and *pied noirs* vigilante groups set out to attack the native population. The official death toll from the repression was 1,273, however the FLN came forward with the figure of 12 000 victims after some investigation, and this figure has never been disputed. An increase in military presence with the recalling of 60 000 soldiers and the 30th August decree that 180 000 dischargeable soldiers would remain in the military further evidences the increased repressive measures. The massacre of Philippeville and the ensuing repercussions for the revolting *fellahs* furthered the success of the FLN as the event marked a “point of no return” through the extreme polarisation of the *pieds noirs* and Muslim communities. The massacre provided motivations for both sides to seek revenge on one another, and thus convinced those who were formerly hesitant within the native population to support the FLN. The French government ceased considerations for reform, making both sides unwilling to accept the status quo thus prolonging the struggle.

9. The FLN also managed to garner greater support during this period due to its political appeal, with the aim of independence uniting leftists, radicals and oppressed peasants alike. Through newcomer Ramdane Abane, the group managed to re-focus its attentions onto its political actions at the Soummam conference in 1956, thus working towards political unity within the indigenous populations. Newly-independent neighbouring countries such as Morocco and Tunisia played vital roles in enabling the FLN’s survival and providing aid for the organisation’s struggle in a
united Maghrebi anti-colonial front (though official announcements were not made of this aid in order to avoid conflict with France).

10. In conclusion, the guerrilla networks were ideal for the national terrain but depended on both interior and exterior support networks. Yet even then, one cannot attribute the movement’s success during the period of 1954 to 1957 wholly to the guerrilla warfare employed, though the sustained violent resistance to French forces managed to maintain the movement’s survival. By polarising the communities of Algeria and providing a strong political allure, the FLN managed not only to sustain itself but also to popularise the nationalist movement during the “heroic years”.

Guerrilla Revolution 1955-1957

The War for Algeria began in the Bled, the wide reaching countryside, mountainous expanses, and rocky landscapes of southern Algeria where the majority of French, Algeria guerilla fighters, and loyal Muslim troops lost their lives in the brutal struggle to keep Algeria apart of France.

As it played out the Algeria Revolution became a Civil War as much as it was a war of insurgency, the French fighting to crush the rebellion at any cost, losing both the military campaign and the campaign for the “hearts & minds” of Algerians in the major population centers and the ‘back country’, where the Algeria guerillas, (terrorists to the French and the colons) of the National Liberation Front (FLN) or Fellaghas ‘bandits’, drew their support from.

The War in the Bled centered around French outposts manned by some experienced Legionnaires and regular army men some of whom had fought in World War II in either the resistance or in the Free French Forces abroad. Others were veterans of the Indochina War and its penultimate battle at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Many more conscripts who had left school, jobs, and their families to fight to keep Algeria French.

Their adversaries fighting for an independent Algeria drew their inspiration and support from their faith, local custom & history, and their experiences fighting for France from the Franco-Prussian War through both World Wars and in Indochina’s well. Algerians no matter their services rendered or individual merit were always second-class citizens in their own country, never Frenchmen in practice or law. Typically the older generations who had fought in both World Wars for France remained loyal, called the Beni Oui-Oui, the Yes Yes [men], tens of thousands of Algerians would die by their own country men’s hands from 1955-1962 because of their loyalties, or lack thereof, to either side.
Throughout the conflict the FLN forces fighting the French especially those in the bled, known also as the Frontier, relied on the use of the somewhat antique weapons left behind by the American, British, Italian, and German armies during the North Africa campaigns of 1940-1943. The rest of their weapons were stolen from French convoys and outposts, taken off dead French soldiers or heirloom shotguns and hunting rifles, unsuited for a true guerrilla campaign. Many more were the weapons of farmers and hunters, shotguns and small caliber rifles.

Algeria’s revolution militarily speaking was built on the tenets of the Maoist guerilla war and the irregular war. The insurgency portion was fought in both urban and rural environments throughout the conflict, never truly metabolizing into a conventional conflict. For the FLN it was bloody and tough challenge, overcome through France’s inability to wage total war for the possession of Algeria, and the ruthless and at first seemingly ineffective campaign of revolutionary terror & guerrilla war waged by the FLN, and the other supporters of the Algerian independence movement.

Conflict in the Frontier region would define the conflict and would not end until the complete withdrawal of France with Algeria’s independence in July 1962. From 1955-1961, the ‘sector troops’ young conscripts with minimal training, led by equally inexperienced officers tried to pacify and defend the Algerian countryside for the fellaghas.

While they fought the static war, ingloriously, it was French Foreign Legion and the Paratroopers who engaged in the non-conventional ground missions and airborne operations, primarily aimed at destroying the FLN’s military capabilities and capturing or killing its leaders in a bounty type system. From the French perspective body count was seen as the main objective, similar to the muddled objectives faced by the French and later the Americans in Vietnam.

Battle of Algiers

Combat between the French authorities (police, regular army, and Special Forces) and Algerian revolutionaries had begun as early as 1955-1956. Bloodshed had begun sporadically, intensifying under the civil violence caused by the escalation of the conflict from a rebellion or ‘police action’, to a full-intensity conflict. The Battle for Algiers like the war in the Frontier was a guerrilla war of hit-and-run tactics, lightning raids, and seek & destroy missions. Severe interrogation techniques & torture were common, and the execution of prisoners used by both sides, assassinations/disappearances all too common in the Casbah and in the bled.
The Battle for Algiers itself began at a time when France was granting independence to both Tunisia and Morocco, while reeling from its invasion of Egypt, allied with Britain and Israel to prevent the Egyptians from nationalizing the Suez Canal, ending with a disastrous military effort and diplomatic outcome in October-November 1956. At the same time Paris was preparing to fortify the capital of French Algeria, Algiers, to protect French infrastructure and the colons & pied noirs (European) very way of life in their ancestral oasis home city. If Algiers had been a city divided for centuries leading up to the battle, when the bombs and gunfire of the FLN and French Paratroopers exploded in the city streets beginning late in 1956, Algiers would become a modern urban battleground, where martial law, and essentially a Police State were established by the French army Para commander, General Jacques Massu (b.1908-2002) and his 10e Parachute Division.

When the first bombs exploded in Algiers the shock and outrage in both the colon sector of Algiers and in Paris was pronounced, the Europeans in Algiers fearing for their life daily until their exodus at the end of the conflict. Using assassins and local girls dressed not in Algerian garb but “Western” & “European” clothing, the FLN targeted cafés, bars, and other European gathering spots for random bombings and shootings, creating a tense situation of urban guerrilla warfare, kept in check by an almost unrestricted but still limited counter-insurgency campaign.

The Battle for Algiers was decided less by bombs, small arms fire, and the air superiority of the French (the latter two useless for them during the actual Battle for Algiers), and more through intelligence gathering. Algiers was pacified through covert operations, the informant system, and most controversially, through the torture of suspected and/or captured Algerian freedom fighters. Throughout the battle and then the rest of the conflict certainly hundreds if not thousands of Algerians were tortured through various means (including electro-shock and brutal beatings) by the intelligence agencies of the French army. During the Battle of Algiers many of interrogators operating under General Massu’s 10e Divisional command were led by General Paul Aussaresses (b.1918).

By the end of the struggle for the Casbah and the greater city of Algiers, thousands were dead, mostly native Algerians but hundreds of French military, police, and colons were killed, grievously injured or otherwise assaulted during the close to year long struggle for the city. Hundreds disappeared, the targets of the French’s intelligence system and the assassination squads of the French army and the FLN. Some of these disappeared may have been killed through the sinister practice of death flights, a covert (black ops) means of disposing of insurgents and potential enemies discreetly by dropping them into the sea at night time from a helicopter.

Les Paras, French Paratrooper command 1956-1961

What can be termed a war within a war, the French Paratrooper command, the Paras’, operated as unquestionably the most effective, and then potentially harmful tool in France’s arsenal during the
Algerian War. Then and now they are the most complex to study as they are the certainly the most controversial aspect of the French effort in Algeria, due to their heavy handed tactics and their use of torture during the Battle of Algiers and the Battle of the Frontier during the climatic end to the guerrilla conflict. Para officers also participated in the attempted putsch in 1961 to overthrow President de Gaulle.

If over generalization can be permitted, the French used Paratroopers in two types of basic roles throughout the conflict, the most common being air-dropped in company sized squads as mobile-rapid deployment-intervention forces, perfect for reinforcing and rescuing ambushed patrols in the bled.

In this role the French Paras often engaged the enemy in classic seek & destroy missions, particularly useful in intercepting supplies from Tunisia and Morocco (in some cases weapons supplied by Egypt). Able to strike at a moments notice through the use of handheld radios, supplied by the Americans, and the use of French Air force reconnaissance aircraft and later American, Sikorksy made helicopters, French paratroopers and para-Legionnaires were the “cutting edge of French military effort in Algeria” according to author Jean Mabire, a veteran of the Commandos de Chasse, in the book The Commandos (1988).