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State-sponsored terrorism: torture and the FLN in the Battle of the Casbah, Algiers, 1956 – 1957

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“It’s hard to start a revolution; it’s even harder to sustain it, and hardest of all to win it. It’s only after it’s won that the greatest difficulties begin”.

 Larbi Ben M’Hidi (one of nine FLN founding members)
 – from the film *La Battaglia di Algeri* (Pontecorvos 1966)

Systematic use of torture was French government policy in the Battle of the Casbah from June 1956 to September 1957. The wider ramifications of this policy for France and the international community are described, including France’s relations with the United Nations (UN), and the role of the Maghreb nationalists and the Afro-Asian bloc in pressuring France to accept early dialogue at the UN General Assembly. The impact of the 1957 Suez Crisis is also explored, together with who was responsible for initiating the torture policy, why France fought such a bitter, protracted and dirty conflict, and the overall human costs of the war.

Background to the Conflict

This paper reviews the important long-standing aetiologies of the internecine Algerian War. After World War II, Britain and France were beset by a surfeit of ethno-nationalist terrorism starting in the late 1940s and continuing through the 1950s. In that 15-year period, global separatist terrorism linked with determined and persuasive leadership achieved the independence sought by Ahmed Ben Bella and the *Front de Liberation Nationale* (FLN) in Algeria, by Archbishop Makarios and the *Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston* (EOKA) in Cyprus, and by Menachem Begin and the *Irgun Zvai Le’umi* (Irgun) in the Palestinian Protectorate.

The Algerian War was the first occasion post-World War II where a nation, threatened by rebel takeover of sovereign territory, had instituted terrorism and torture as weapons of the state, instruments of foreign policy and the principal strategic measures, albeit contrary to espoused government doctrine. Widespread systematic unremitting terrorism, perpetrated by both sides, was a hallmark of this conflict and was to last its entire duration. It was a conflict fought without the respite of temporary cease-fires and which brought France perilously close to civil war.

Two top-level wartime discussions held three years apart had profound effects on the destinies of both the British imperial and French Republican colonies; and not least on the future of Muslim French North Africa. In August 1941, Roosevelt and Churchill signed the Atlantic Charter which provided *inter alia* that, at the successful conclusion of hostilities, no territorial changes were to occur that were not the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned (Davies

1997, 1027). France was not a party to this agreement, but in January 1944, a meeting of senior representatives of the Free French forces considered relations with ‘France Overseas’ after the war and agreed on a policy of assimilation – ‘France Overseas’ was to become an integral part of European France (Gifford and Louis 1982, 89). These two war-time declarations laid down the framework for the potential development of anti-colonial struggles at war’s end.

For France, her post-war colonial difficulties began immediately. Guerrilla warfare erupted in December 1946 with the Ho Chi Minh led Viet Minh in northern Vietnam. The war lasted until May 1954 when France unconditionally surrendered her sovereignty over Indochina following the defeat of a multinational French force at Dien Bien Phu (Windrow 2004, 625). One-fifth of this French force was from the North African *l’Armee d’Afrique* consisting of white and native infantry regiments (Windrow 2004, 164-5). A mere six-months later, French forces were deployed to suppress a widespread ‘native’ insurrection in Algeria. Apart from the rebels’ proclamation via Cairo radio and scattered pamphlets on 1 November 1954, there was no official declaration of war by either side (Horne 1996, 94-5). The Algerian Muslim nationalist movement, the FLN, continued their fight for independence during the next eight years.

A French expeditionary force had been sent to Algeria in 1830 to defend the interests of local French traders. Algiers was soon captured but the rest of the country resisted the invaders for 17 years. In 1848, the Second Republic admitted Algeria as part of France. Colonisation, particularly from southern France, Italy, Corsica, Malta and Spain, rapidly ensued during the

1830s, with another peak of French settlers, *colons* or *pieds noirs*, during 1871 following the war-time loss of Alsace-Lorraine to Prussia. The colonists were granted expropriated Arab lands which provoked a lasting resentment of *la presence française* by the *indigenes* (Horne 1996, 30). The *colons* in general received large tracts of the most arable Algerian land.

The French invasion of this part of the North African Mediterranean littoral, known as the Maghreb (Arab: the west), with its consequent severe economic, social, educational and political repercussions for the Muslim, was exacerbated by widespread relocations of Muslims to mainly rural areas as poorly paid farmhands. A contentious anomaly in French law existed in Algeria from the time of the arrival of the *colons*: the matter of French citizenship. Muslims were automatically French 'subjects', but not French 'citizens'. Early legislation had permitted Muslims to be subject to Islamic, or *Sharia*, as opposed to French, law. This may have been designed as cultural and religious protection, but it became in effect a prison, because the Muslim wishing to adopt French citizenship had to renounce these rights, thereby committing an act of apostasy (Horne 1996, 35). By 1870, the *colon* population had risen to over 200,000 and their increasing dissatisfaction with the military administration of Algeria instituted since 1830, led to Paris granting them greater control over their affairs. Berbers were the oldest inhabitants of Algeria and, in 1954, were the largest proportion of the 9 million Muslim population. At the outbreak of the war there existed 1 million settlers in Algeria; at its conclusion, less than 175,000 remained (Talbot 1980, 234).

Causes of the Conflict

The main causes of the rising Algerian discontent in the early 20th century were high Muslim unemployment coupled with severely depressed wage earnings. A Muslim majority, who were dispossessed, disenfranchised and saw no likelihood of French-led reform, was ripe for insurrection. In the latter half of the 19th century the harsh rural conditions of the Muslim were exacerbated by the creation of the Algerian wine industry following the phylloxera grapevine aphid (*Daktulosphaira vitifoliae*) plague which had devastated France's wine production. The Algerian wine industry came to account for half of Algeria's exports to France, but it hardly helped the economic predicament of the Muslim. It provided him with little steady work, produced a crop that did not nourish him and offended his religion (Horne 1996, 62-4). Agrarian jobless left for France in large numbers. After 1945, there were over 500,000 Muslims in France – the wages they sent home were a boon, equalling a third of those of the whole agricultural labour force in Algeria. For France, they provided a cheap labour force particularly for menial tasks. They were housed in the slums of Paris and Marseilles. They became fertile soil for the

propaganda of communists and other disgruntled militants. When they returned to Algeria, they brought home these seeds of coherent discontent.

A hungry, chronically poor and unemployed member of an ethnic majority, a down-trodden second-class urban-slum-dwelling disenfranchised native with poor French literacy, yet still eligible for compulsory overseas military service and without access to social security, would in time be an ideal recruit to a nationalist movement. And so in time the *fellah* (peasant labourer) was transformed into the *fellagha* (rebel) of the FLN-led Algerian rebellion. Saadi Yacef describes the plight of the Algerian *indigene* as the victim of a kind of apartheid.¹

France's humiliating defeat in Indochina, announced in Paris on the ninth anniversary of Victory-in-Europe (VE) Day, 8 May 1954, compounding France's capitulation in 1940, made a deep impression on minds in the Muslim world. The *baraka*, the aura of the invincibility of the Europeans, was broken irretrievably. The loss of *baraka* stimulated the covert revolutionary Algerian nationalist movements founded in the interwar years to an early expression of violent terrorism. Barbarity first erupted in Algeria on VE Day 1945 in Setif, an insignificant inland market town. A large celebratory Muslim crowd was fired on by a small panicked group of French gendarmes triggering a 5-day violent rampage by Muslims against *colons*, specifically the *petit fonctionnaires*, symbols of the *presence française* (Burleigh 2008, 112-3). The brutal ferocity of the army-led repression which followed cemented in the Algerian native an incalculable and ineradicable hatred for all things French. The French repressions were so successful in splintering the various nationalist groups, whose leaders were exiled or imprisoned, that the *colons'* peaceful ascendancy survived another 9.5 years. Nevertheless, the shots fired in the Setif Atrocity became the first volley fired in the Algerian War (Horne 1996, 25-8), a long conflict, the bloodiest of all colonial wars.

The Uprising

On 10 October 1954, the new revolutionary movement received its name, the FLN, and a date was fixed for the simultaneous outbreak of revolt throughout Algeria: "00.01 hours on 1 November" – All Saints' Day 1954 (Horne 1996, 78-9). The choice of dates was prescient. The Catholic *colons* would be celebrating the holiday festivities and there would be minimal police vigilance.

Even though Algerian support for the FLN, had increased from 50 per cent to almost 95 per cent by 1957, in the first 2 years of the war, the FLN faced many troubles within its own ranks. It was thinly

¹Interview with Saadi Yacef in the French documentary film, *Remembering History* (Pontecorvo 2004).

stretched throughout the six Algerian autonomous administrative zones. The FLN was short of arms and money, without central direction and torn by quarrels over tactics and personalities. Some resolution was achieved at a summit meeting in the Algerian valley of the Soummam which founded a new institution to patch over the leadership crisis. The five member *Comite de Coordination et d'Execution* (CCE) decided to take the war from the countryside into the city of Algiers. The offensive commenced as a terrorist campaign followed by the launching of a hugely optimistic 8-day general strike, which the French easily crushed. The strike was called for 28 January 1957 to coincide with the opening day of United Nations debates on the Algerian question. New York's attention was as equally sought as that of Paris.

The FLN's stronghold in Algiers was the Casbah, the old Turkish city, the most populous slums in the world (Talbot 1980, 78-9). The FLN's Autonomous Zone of Algiers was controlled by a youthful leader, Saadi Yacef. His organisation consisted of a military branch of about 150 personnel and a small bombing network with less than 50 members. The bomb planters were mostly young women who could pass as Europeans. In this respect, Yacef was the first to develop the very successful terrorist instrument of female bomb squads. However, the introduction of indiscriminate bombings within Algiers was by the *colons* – the FLN later merely refined the tactic. Yassef's military branch was mainly composed of gunmen, though stabbings and cut throats were routine assassinations in the circuitous Casbah alleys. The gunmen did not kill at random – targets were prominent settlers, Algerians identified as collaborators, or agents suspected of betrayal. Bombings were later used to terrorise the settler community and were continued in spite of the concern that reprisals against the Algerian population might weaken their support for the FLN. One estimate of the number of terrorist attacks of all kinds was that, from a figure of four in January 1956, they rose to 50 in July, 96 in September and 122 in December, or approximately four assaults per day (Talbot 1980, 82). As long as the FLN maintained the anonymity of its agents, it had a very significant intelligence advantage over the French.

By January 1957, the Algerian governor-general, Robert Lacoste, responding to the increasing effectiveness of the FLN terrorism plus a looming general strike, called in the 4,600-strong 10th Paratroop Division under the command of General Jacques Massu. Massu was granted authority under the provisions of the *Special Powers Law* of 16 March 1956, establishing him independent not only of the municipal authorities but also of the military chain of command and making him fully responsible for the maintenance of order in the city. For the first time in the two years of war, France was accepting the FLN's challenge, confronting it with total force. Massu's

arrival signified a cession of power to the military, which was not fully restored to the civil authorities for another five years (Horne 1996, 188).

The laws of the Fourth Republic required a suspect to be brought before an examining magistrate within 24 hours of arrest and requests for orders of internment were to follow immediately on the arrest of suspected terrorists. The Army, on the other hand, relentlessly pursued the immediate exploitation of whatever information a detainee could be made to divulge. In the hands of specialist Army interrogators, and subjected to multiple interrogations, the prisoner was forced to talk by any means, notwithstanding that France was a co-signatory of the four Geneva Conventions and was aware of the stipulations of Common Article 3 – this article establishes a bare minimum of humane treatment for any combatant, absolutely bans the use of torture even in times of war, and is non-derogate.²

Interrogation by the Use of Force (Torture)

Torture became the Army's principle response to urban terrorism – beatings, water-boarding, water deprivation, bodies contorted by means of pulleys and ropes, burning, and electric shock applied to the genitalia. The ubiquitous hand-cranked field generator, or *magneto*, became the preferred bestial measure to exact confessions – it caused excruciating pain yet rarely killed anyone. Increasingly, torture seamlessly moved to murder. A technique imported by the French from their years in Indochina, the 'wood-gathering party', became common. French troops would take a prisoner aside, execute him and then report him as having been 'shot while trying to escape'. Others were shot to look like it had been the work of the FLN (Talbot 1980, 92). The French Army command believed that by such means they were meeting the requirements of government policy. This is not to say that the military ever received from the government explicit orders to resort to torture. In an interview in the late 1990s, General Massu exclusively used the term 'interrogation by use of force' when questioned about his use of torture. He freely admitted that such 'interrogation' was used systematically. He defended his policy by saying that all wars of insurrection also involved the use of torture.

On the question of French torture, FLN policy was that those captured by the French were forbidden to talk only for 24 hours to allow other members of their cell to be moved to new safe-houses. After the elapse of 24 hours, they could then talk freely, thereby hoping to eliminate the need for the French to continue protracted interrogations and torture.³

²Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 12 August 1949, Common Article 3.

³Documentary film, *Remembering History* (Pontecorvo 2004).

While the FLN terrorist campaign, which now included simultaneous attacks throughout the city, had originally been prosecuted on the basis that the FLN faced an undermanned and poorly informed police force inhibited by constraints that civil and criminal law placed on the use of state power, the reality on the ground had changed. The FLN were defeated in the Casbah by the Army's ruthless and unrelenting application of systematic torture, summary arrests, reprisal killings and murders in custody. Most FLN prisoners never reached the internment camp.

Campaign to End the Use of Torture

In spite of the immense outcry protesting the use of torture, the civilian authorities failed to withdraw the Army's special powers. The floodtide of French protest from mid-1955 reached its high-water mark by spring 1957. The Catholic writer and Nobel Prize laureate, Francois Mauriac, made some of the earliest allegations on torture against the army and police in his weekly column in *L'Express*. Probably the most widely read of all the memoirs on the war, Servan-Schreiber's *Lieutenant in Algeria*, became the best known for instigating the campaign against torture (Celestin and DalMolin 2008, 266). The authors of the first allegations of torture were Catholics. Never in modern times had French Catholics figured so prominently in an essentially left-wing protest movement. For Catholics, any criticism of the army had been unthinkable. No Catholic journal was more vocal in opposition to the war than *Esprit*. The historian and *colon*, Henri Alleg, the editor of *Alger Republican*, was captured and tortured in 1958. He published his personal account of torture in a book, *The Question*, which included a preface by Jean Paul Sartre. Although banned, it provoked a shift against the military's conduct of the war within metropolitan France. The government of M. Guy Mollet ultimately had no choice but to make at least a show of investigating allegations of torture (Talbot 1980, 98-9). Great pressure was mounted on the Fourth Republic by the national and international press, by the Afro-Asian lobby within the United Nations, by an ambivalent United States, and by an increasingly doubtful electorate. The only alternative to torturing the Algerians was to negotiate their independence.

The Fourth Republic (1946–1958), which saw a new prime minister every 6 months, was ultimately destroyed by the effects of Indochina, the Suez Crisis and finally the Algerian War. The Fifth Republic evolved in 1958 when Charles de Gaulle, who served as President from 1958 to 1969, was recalled to quell the revolt of army officers in Algeria which had all the makings of a military coup that could have spread to Paris (Davies 1997, 1072-3).

The Suez Crisis

On 26 July 1957, Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of Egypt and self-styled leader of a pan-Islamic world,

in direct retaliation for the American and British cancellation of the Aswan Dam loan project, proclaimed an Egyptian take-over of the Suez Canal. On 5 November, a little over three months later, an Anglo-French airborne assault was made at Port Said. France was obsessed by Egypt's role in sponsoring the Algerian rebellion and the notion that if Nasser fell, the collapse of the Algerian revolt would soon follow. The Mollet government readily aligned with Anthony Eden's Britain and their ally, Israel. A hitherto passive United States reacted strongly to the threatened Anglo-French control of Suez. An ultimatum for a declaration of cease fire in 12 hours was personally given by Eisenhower to Eden. Eisenhower, it is suggested, even threatened a run on the pound (Carlton 1981, 451-2). The Suez War was the shortest war in history lasting just 40 hours. The effect on Algeria was immense. FLN morale soared, and real assistance from Egypt seemed assured with abandoned Anglo-French military equipment rapidly transported to the FLN rebels. For the French military, after their resentment against the British had subsided, bitterness against their civil leaders was such that many of the seeds of the military revolt that were to appear 18 months later were sown among the paratroopers at Suez. The Suez humiliations only reinforced the military's determination to win in Algiers (Horne 1996, 164).

The United Nations

Clinging to a narrow legal interpretation of the United Nations Charter, successive French governments generally refused to recognise any United Nations jurisdiction in matters of empire, even the Fourth Republic's 1946 redesignated French Union. The United Nations' general endorsement of self-determination enshrined in Article 73 of its Charter could not override the recognition in Article 2 (7) of non-interference in colonial matters (Thomas 2001, 91-3). The issue of the Algerian war was first raised formally at the United Nations in January 1955. Widespread massacres by the FLN of settler families at Philippeville in rural Constantine in eastern Algeria on 20 August 1955 and the subsequent brutal military reprisal pushed Algeria back on the agenda at the United Nations (Horne 1996, 119-21). Furthermore, once French Morocco and the former French Protectorate of Tunisia joined the United Nations as independent states in 1956, both countries became leading advocates in the General Assembly of the Algerian national cause (Thomas 2001, 106). Senator John Kennedy addressed the United States Senate in July 1957 and attacked the Eisenhower administration for 'retreating from the principles of independence and anti-colonialism'. American policy swiftly changed – rather than backing France in the United Nations it would abstain. This response by the leading Western power was a damaging countermove to France; one that de Gaulle would not forget. Three more years

were to pass until December 1960 when the United Nations ultimately recognised Algeria's right to self-determination (Brace and Brace 1960, 157-9).

The General Assembly convened in late January 1957 with the 'Battle of Algiers' at full throttle and the call for a general strike imminent – the FLN gained unprecedented international attention. In spite of the best efforts of the FLN, the arithmetic of General Assembly membership, energetically lobbied by France, counted against them. Thomas (2001, 121) suggests that the United Nations contribution to conflict resolution in French North Africa was limited to shaping international opinion, providing a quasi-official diplomatic forum for FLN representatives and influencing France's major allies of the dubious merits of the Algerian connection.

Assessment

The term 'terrorism' provides governments with a powerful rhetorical tool for discrediting those who forcefully oppose their policies. The 'terrorist' label automatically places actions and agents outside the norms of acceptable behaviour. The rhetoric effectively stifles political debate, repudiates calls for negotiation, and, consequently, paves the way for state-sanctioned violence (Kapitan 2004, 11). The violence of the FLN succeeded in placing their cause on the world agenda and engendered insufficient international opprobrium to block the ventilation of the FLN's plight within the General Assembly.

On 15 September 1962, the highly decorated but disillusioned French veteran, Ben Bella, who had formed the *Organisation Speciale* in 1949, the predecessor of the FLN, became the first Algerian President. In the eight years of the war, 17,456 French soldiers died. Yet it was the Algerians who suffered the heavier losses. Nearly 140,000 were victims of their fellow rebels, another 16,000 Algerian civilians died at the hands of the FLN and, according to French figures, another 50,000 are estimated to have been spirited away and presumably killed by the French military. Similar French figures suggest a total of 207,000 Algerians perished. To these must be added the *harkis*, the Algerian auxiliaries fighting with the French, only to be left in the lurch at independence with an estimated 150,000 subsequently slain. The FLN are said to have killed more Algerians during the war than it did Frenchmen (Talbot 1980, 246-7). To the FLN, the process of 'decolonisation' also involved a cleansing out of what they regarded as Arab collaborationists and thereby they exacted a high toll of fellow Muslims at the same time as fighting the French.

A basic tenet of terrorist tactics is the strict avoidance of open conflict with superior enemy forces (Hoffman 2006, 35). By manoeuvring forces into the urban confines of the Casbah, the FLN exposed itself to direct attack by a numerically superior, better supported and reinforced, and a more technologically

sophisticated enemy. The local Muslim sympathy with the rebels was also shaken since the French reprisal attacks in the narrow confines of the slums nearly always involved killing many innocent Muslim bystanders. The consequences of the 15-month long battle of Algiers, was a much weakened FLN. Torture and the threat of torture led to betrayal and French collaboration resulting in the capture of rebel cells, including arms and ammunition. The FLN senior leadership was all but destroyed and the eventual capture of the commander, Yacef, was devastating to their cause. The FLN were forced to seek safe-havens in neighbouring Tunisia which further compounded their difficulties in maintaining secure communication channels. Thus the tactical defeat of the FLN in Algiers by Massu's four regiments of paratroopers forced the FLN to abandon large-scale urban terrorism. Strategically, however, the FLN had succeeded. They had reduced popular French backing for continuing the war and had created deep fissures in French civil-military relations.

Whilst the Irgun and Lehi used more selective terrorism on British and Palestinian targets, the use of terror in Algeria and Kenya was much more indiscriminate. FLN violence and intimidation established the FLN as an alternative political movement and goaded a French military over-reaction. The French obliged by increasing their forces in Algeria from 80,000 in 1954 to almost 500,000 two years later, a level of commitment maintained until the end of the war (Burleigh 2008, 117). Attacking civilians in any conflict is morally indefensible and politically counterproductive. Colonial settlement involves the dispossession and disenfranchisement of indigenous populations, even if it does not entail direct violence. Hence attacks on civilians are a common feature of struggles against settler colonialism – in Northern Ireland, South Africa, Kenya, Palestine/Israel and particularly in Algeria (Beinin 2003).

It was the issue of torture, more than any other, that stung governments of the Fourth Republic into attacking civil liberties, especially with respect to freedom of the press. Government use of terror will always undermine public support for a government and will expose the hypocrisy of the capitalist proposition that governments are just and obedient to the rule of law (Garrison 2008, 31).

The question of the responsibility for the introduction and continuance of a policy of systematic torture remains. The granting of the special powers to General Massu, which overwhelmingly had the approval of the French National Assembly, places responsibility, *ab initio*, clearly at the general's command headquarters, but an uninterrupted paper trail from Massu's headquarters to Paris and ultimately to Prime Minister Guy Mollet, or to his successors, has never been established. The responsibility of those prosecuting the policy of torture links those in Algiers with the Quai d'Orsay Foreign Office and the National

Assembly. This must be accepted. Even if a paper trail has not been uncovered that directly connects the Algerian French Military Command's use of torture with the French cabinet, the French government nevertheless is clearly responsible for the strategic actions of its military forces. Media attacks on the paratroops for their conduct conveniently distracted public attention away from the question as to who decided that Algiers must at all costs be rid of terrorism.

Conclusion

The question as to why France struggled for so long and so bitterly to maintain power in Algeria may be answered by the suggestion that "the existence of France as a nation depended on its empire" (Lapidus 1989, 694). Furthermore, there was strong metropolitan French support for the settlers' argument that they should not and could not be abandoned. The British could give up India so easily precisely because it had no British settlers and no one thought of it as part of Great Britain (Embree 1998, 166). That repression begat terror begat repression was further confirmed by the Algerian war as a fact of any revolutionary war and was made abundantly clear in Pontecorvos' 1966 film, *La Battaglia di Algeri*. By September 1957, torture by the French military had prevailed in the Battle of the Casbah, but a failure to implement immediate changes to French political strategy merely attenuated an unwinnable war. The FLN withdrawal from urban Algiers on the other hand was almost that of a defeated entity. Nevertheless, as early as 1957, the FLN's fortunes were clearly in the ascendancy in the more important international arena: the war of words. Thus far the FLN's campaign had confirmed the veracity of Baroness Margaret Thatcher's later (1984) dictum that "terrorism depends on the oxygen of publicity".

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