

Armed Conflict Events Data



In the early morning hours of All Saints' Day, November 1, 1954, guerrillas of the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale -- FLN) launched attacks in various parts of Algeria against military installations, police posts, warehouses, communications facilities, and public utilities. From Cairo, the FLN broadcast a proclamation calling on Muslims in Algeria to join in a national struggle for the "restoration of the Algerian state, sovereign, democratic, and social, within the framework of the principles of Islam." The French minister of interior, socialist François Mitterrand, responded sharply that "the only possible negotiation is war." It was the reaction of Premier Pierre Mendès-France that set the tone of French policy for the next five years. On November 12, he declared in the National Assembly: "One does not compromise when it comes to defending the internal peace of the nation, the unity and integrity of the Republic. The Algerian departments are part of the French Republic. They have been French for a long time, and they are irrevocably French... Between them and metropolitan France there can be no conceivable secession."

As the FLN campaign spread through the countryside, many European farmers in the interior sold their holdings and sought refuge in Algiers, where their cry for sterner countermeasures swelled. Colon vigilante units, whose unauthorized activities were conducted with the passive cooperation of police authorities, carried out *ratonnades* (literally, rat-hunts; synonymous with Arab-killings) against suspected FLN members of the Muslim community. The colons demanded the proclamation of a state of emergency, the proscription of all groups advocating separation from France, and the imposition of capital punishment for politically motivated crimes.

An important watershed in the War of Independence was the massacre of civilians by the FLN near the town of Philippeville in August 1955. Before this operation, FLN policy was to attack only military and government-related targets. The *wilaya* commander for the Constantine region, however, decided a drastic escalation was needed. The killing by the FLN and its supporters of 123 people, including old women and babies, shocked Jacques Soustelle, the French governor general, into calling for more repressive measures against the rebels. The government claimed it killed 1,273 guerrillas in retaliation; according to the FLN,

12,000 Muslims perished in an orgy of bloodletting by the armed forces and police, as well as colon gangs. After Philippeville, all-out war began in Algeria.

By 1956 France had committed more than 400,000 troops to Algeria. Although the elite airborne units and the Foreign Legion received particular notoriety, approximately 170,000 of the regular French army troops in Algeria were Muslim Algerians, most of them volunteers. France also sent air force and naval units to the Algerian theater.

During 1956 and 1957, the National Liberation Army (Armée de Libération Nationale--ALN), the FLN's military arm, successfully applied hit-and-run tactics according to the classic canons of guerrilla warfare. Specializing in ambushes and night raids and avoiding direct contact with superior French firepower, the internal forces targeted army patrols, military encampments, police posts, and colon farms, mines, and factories, as well as transportation and communications facilities. Once an engagement was broken off, the guerrillas merged with the population in the countryside. Kidnapping was commonplace, as were the ritual murder and mutilation of captured French military, colons of both genders and every age, suspected collaborators, and traitors. At first, the revolutionary forces targeted only Muslim officials of the colonial regime; later, they coerced or killed even those civilians who simply refused to support them.

Although successful in engendering an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty within both communities in Algeria, the revolutionaries' coercive tactics suggested that they had not as yet inspired the bulk of the Muslim people to revolt against French colonial rule. Gradually, however, the FLN/ALN gained control in certain sectors of the Aurès, the Kabylie, and other mountainous areas around Constantine and south of Algiers and Oran. In these places, the ALN established a simple but effective -- although frequently temporary -- military administration that was able to collect taxes and food and to recruit manpower. But it was never able to hold large fixed positions. Muslims all over the country also initiated underground social, judicial, and civil organizations, gradually building their own state.

Late in 1957, General Raoul Salan, commanding the French army in Algeria, instituted a system of *quadrillage*, dividing the country into sectors, each permanently garrisoned by troops responsible for suppressing rebel operations in their assigned territory. Salan's methods sharply reduced the instances of FLN terrorism but tied down a large number of troops in static defense. Salan also constructed a heavily patrolled system of barriers to limit infiltration from Tunisia and Morocco.

At the same time, the French military ruthlessly applied the principle of collective responsibility to villages suspected of sheltering, supplying, or in any way cooperating with the guerrillas. Villages that could not be reached by mobile units were subject to aerial bombardment. The French also initiated a program of concentrating large segments of the rural population, including whole villages, in camps under military supervision to prevent them from aiding the rebels -- or, according to the official explanation, to protect them from FLN extortion. In the three years (1957-60) during which the *regroupement* program was followed, more than 2 million Algerians were removed from their villages, mostly in the mountainous areas, and resettled in the plains, where many found it impossible to re-establish their accustomed economic or social situations. Living conditions in the camps were poor.

In France, the feeling was widespread that another debacle like that of Indochina was in the offing and that the government would order another precipitate pullout and sacrifice French honor to political expediency. Many saw in Charles de Gaulle the only public figure capable of rallying the nation and giving direction to the French government. Europeans as well as many Muslims greeted de Gaulle's return to power, in June 1958, as the breakthrough needed to end the hostilities. De Gaulle's political initiatives threatened the FLN with the prospect of losing the support of the growing numbers of Muslims who were tired of the war and had never been more than lukewarm in their commitment to a totally independent Algeria.

Meanwhile, the French army shifted its tactics at the end of 1958 from dependence on *quadrillage* to the use of mobile forces deployed on massive search-and-destroy missions against ALN strongholds. Within the next year, Salan's successor, General Maurice Challe, appeared to have suppressed major rebel resistance. In 1958-59 the French army had won military control in Algeria and was the closest it would be to victory. But political developments had already overtaken the French army's successes.

During 1958-59, opposition to the conflict was growing among many segments of French society. International pressure was also building on France to grant Algeria independence. In September 1959, de Gaulle dramatically reversed his stand on Algeria and uttered the words "self-determination" in a speech. Claiming that de Gaulle had betrayed them, the colons, with backing by elements of the French army, staged insurrections in January 1960 and April 1961. De Gaulle was now prepared to abandon the colons, the group that no previous French government could have written off.

Talks with the FLN reopened at Evian in May 1961; after several false starts, the French government decreed that a cease-fire would take effect on March 19, 1962. In their final form, the Evian Accords allowed the colons equal legal protection with Algerians over a three year period. These rights included respect for property, participation in public affairs, and a full range of civil and cultural rights. At the end of that period, however, Europeans would be obliged to become Algerian citizens or be classified as aliens with the attendant loss of rights. The French electorate approved the Evian Accords by an overwhelming 91 percent vote in a referendum held in June 1962.

On July 1, 1962, some 6 million of a total Algerian electorate of 6.5 million cast their ballots in the referendum on independence. The vote was nearly unanimous. De Gaulle pronounced Algeria an independent country on July 3. The Provisional Executive, however, proclaimed July 5, the 132nd anniversary of the French entry into Algeria, as the day of national independence.

The FLN 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. The actual figure of war dead may be far higher than the original FLN and official French estimates, even if it does not reach the 1 million adopted by the Algerian government. Uncounted thousands of Muslim civilians lost their lives in French army *ra-tissages*, bombing raids, and vigilante reprisals. The war uprooted more than 2 million Algerians, who were forced to relocate in French concentration camps or to flee to Morocco, Tunisia, and into the Algerian hinterland, where many thousands died of starvation, disease, and exposure. Additional pro-French Muslims were killed when the FLN settled accounts after independence.

References:

How to Stop a War, [Algeria - A Country Study](#).