

Two Sides of the Same COIN: Torture and Terror in the Algerian War, 1954-62

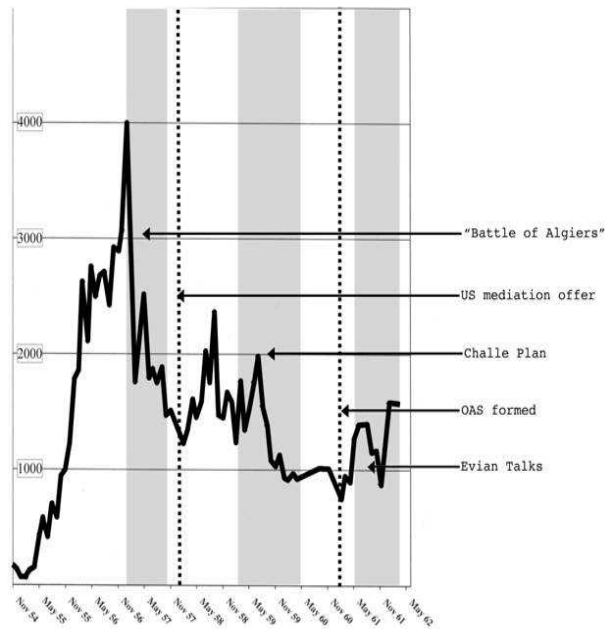
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Introduction

The Algerian Revolution is mainly remembered today for two things: the widespread and systematic use of torture by the French in order to break down the underground organization of their opponents, the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN); and France's subsequent capitulation, despite overwhelming advantages in manpower, territorial control, and virtually every other measure of military effectiveness anyone would care to name. Algeria may well be the strangest of the strange defeats that punctuated France's descent from the ranks of the Great Powers.

Its improbability is illustrated by the diagram below, which is based on French intelligence records of FLN operations, onto which some major events of the war have been superimposed.



Adapted from Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 292.

What is being counted in this chart are monthly totals of “rebel actions,” which could be anything from a single gunshot to a wholesale massacre of village elders. Given that French estimates of total FLN armed strength in Algeria rarely exceeded 20,000, and was less than half that when the war ended, the amplitude of the line suggests considerable determination by the FLN to use force, to the extent they were able. Yet it is the slope of the line that stands out. One might draw a similar graph of, say, British merchant shipping sunk by German submarines during World War I, in which case it would come as no surprise that Germany loses the war. To learn instead that, somehow, Britain had lost the war would at least require further explanation. In this instance torture has always been at the center of that explanation: it is the calculated cruelty of the French campaign that is thought to have broken the link between tactical and strategic success, so that, having once again conquered Algeria, the French had no choice but to abandon it to their enemies.

My aim here is not to challenge this basic interpretation, but to contextualize it in relation to what was in fact the primary tactical reality of the Algerian War—the war-winning tactic, if you will—which was terrorism on the part of the FLN. Virtually none of the rebel actions represented on the chart were attacks against armed formations of French soldiers. Such engagements occurred, of course, but it was almost invariably French initiative that brought them about. FLN violence was directed mainly against Algerian Muslims, particularly those who were in a position to promote cooperation or compromise with the French; European settlers in Algeria, who were strong supporters of exemplary violence by French forces, and defended themselves by waging a campaign of counter-terrorist reprisals against their Muslim neighbors; and finally isolated individuals representative of the French authorities: police officers, soldiers on their own, civilian officials, and so on.

Terrorism is sometimes characterized as indiscriminate violence, calculated to instill generalized fear and to express the hatred of the perpetrators for the status quo, of which their victims are presumed to be representatives or beneficiaries. This is very much the way terrorism is represented in the United States today, at least for official purposes. This is reasonable up to a point. Terrorists are not usually concerned with the personal identities of their victims, and do not normally conceive their actions in terms of a specific sequence of tactical outcomes, each of which is calculated to exploit and build on preceding ones. Knowing where, when, and how the last terrorist attack occurred provides very little information about where, when, and how the next one will occur. In mathematical terms, this is what “random” means.

The distinctive feature of terrorism is not that its violence is more terrifying by virtue of its randomness, however. In one crucial sense it is not random at all. Terrorists attack unarmed or defenseless people because it is easier to do so with the limited means available. Terrorism in one form or another has featured in every campaign of revolutionary insurgency in modern times. Its exceptional prominence in the Algerian War is simply a reflection of the extreme weakness of the FLN relative to the French army. In all cases, however, the terrorist’s problem is the same: he must achieve psychological effects that are grossly disproportionate to the material results that his paltry instruments of violence will allow. His aim is not simply to kill his targets and frighten the survivors, but to undermine the customary structures and institutions from which people seek protection in their daily lives.

The common characteristic of all terrorism is that it is deliberately transgressive of prevailing norms governing the use of force.^[1] That is how we are able to recognize it, and distinguish it from other kinds of criminal or military violence. It does not matter what the norms are: if kidnapping for ransom, or the enslavement and mutilation of prisoners, are accepted characteristics of warfare in a given age, then such actions will not be terrorism in that age. This is why there is never going to be an international legal regime that can “govern” terrorism (as there is one that governs war); nor even one to define it, except in the negative sense just described. It is also why governments cannot treat terrorists as “combatants,” a category that, at

any given moment, is always defined by complex customary norms that it is the business of the terrorist to overturn.

The non-normative, indeed anti-normative nature of terrorism is central to the strategy of the FLN. FLN attacks were not calculated to attract the loyalty of innocent bystanders, in the manner popularized by Maoist theories of revolutionary violence (however imperfectly such notions may have been exemplified by the actual practice of revolutionary war in Asia). The FLN could not aspire to control a territorial base anywhere inside Algeria, nor to assemble forces there that could one day hope to challenge the government on equal terms; nor to attract the intervention of powerful outsiders. What it could hope to do was to unhinge the customary habits and loyalties by which Algerians lived, in the expectation that the resulting breakdown of public order would favor them; as it in fact did.

It is well known that terrorists generally fail to achieve their political ends, a subject on which a considerable literature exists;^[2] though in a sense the sources of failure are not mysterious. Terrorism, as countless critics of the American “war on terror” have noted, is no more than a tactic, and if there is one sort of error that almost guarantees military failure, it is to mistake a tactic for a strategy, by assuming that tactical success, if you can achieve it, will speak for itself. It doesn’t, no more for the masterminds of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon than for the architects of the *Blitzkrieg*.

It is also true that, like other tactics, terrorism works best in combination with other forms of fighting, or with political measures that make up for its deficiency as a means of consolidating and legitimizing political power. Other forms of fighting weren’t available to the FLN, but they did link their campaign of terror with a sophisticated assault on the complex web of international dependencies without which the French could not have sustained their commitment in Algeria. Exemplary violence, particularly the decision to embark on the campaign of urban terrorism known as the “Battle of Algiers,” made the FLN visible and politically credible in the eyes of the non-aligned world, whose members did not regard such methods as inherently atrocious, and with whom the French wished to maintain cordial relations.

The FLN was also careful to present itself as a movement of national liberation, and not as the vanguard of a universal Islamist revolt. This was an important consideration for France’s allies, for whom decolonization was becoming something to manage, rather than to oppose outright. During the course of the Algerian War, 22 former European colonies in Africa joined the United Nations. France’s friends grew weary of being told on the one hand that what was happening in Algeria was an internal matter in which they had no say, and on the other that it represented a threat to the Western alliance as a whole. The gradual evolution of the United States from loyal ally to “honest broker” was particularly disconcerting to the French, who believed that the FLN would never stop fighting as long as they imagined the United States might intervene on their behalf.^[3]

Nevertheless, a shrewd hand on the levers of international opinion and alliance politics is probably not going to be enough, in itself, to redeem terrorism as an instrument of policy. Terrorism’s essential weakness, and the root of its frequent failure when employed in isolation from other military methods, lies in the subtlety of the psychological effects it must achieve in order to succeed.

There can be no assurance that violence aimed at the dissolution of social norms will not drive people back upon the government—the forces of order—from whom they may demand extraordinary measures of protection, and to whom they may offer extraordinary sacrifices and greater submission in return. This has generally been the fate of strategic bombing campaigns, for instance; another form of warfare to which the word “terror” has been attached, and which has also promised victory though the creation of a moral and psychological vacuum that only the side inflicting the suffering is supposed to be able to fill. Like strategic bombing, terrorism is an awfully blunt instrument for this kind of delicate psycho-social surgery, by which traditional norms are to

be severed without stimulating the growth of new ones that may prove equally inimical to the terrorist's cause.

It is in this connection that the French recourse to torture may have provided the margin of victory for their opponents, by making it impossible for Algerian Muslims to find refuge in the face of violence by the FLN. In 1957, when terrorism in Algiers was at its height, approximately 40 percent of the male population of the Muslim quarter of the city was tortured by members of the French 10th Parachute Division, lately arrived by way of Indochina and Suez, and by any reckoning one of the toughest, most experienced, and most thoroughly disillusioned military units in the world. Their use of torture was neither incidental nor much of a secret. One major general was dismissed for criticizing the campaign in the press while it was underway. Most victims of torture survived to spread the word, including some Europeans who sued the French government over their mistreatment. Not all survived, however. Over the course of the war somewhere between 3,000 to 4,000 Algerians died under interrogation by the French. Summary execution was routine in the case of individuals whose personal roles were considered too central to allow them to be released or turned over to the courts.

Torture, like terrorism, features in the conduct of most revolutionary warfare. It was a familiar if inconsequential feature of the Indochina War, which provided the 10th Paras with their primary experience of counterinsurgency. Yet the decision to employ torture in systematic fashion was an innovation in its way, a calculated response to the problems of an urban insurgency, of which Indochina had provided only limited experience. In Southeast Asia the tactical challenge had been to identify and attack those often remote and isolated areas that afforded the Viet Minh political and logistical support. Doing so would degrade the enemy's military capacity, and perhaps compel him to concentrate his forces to defend irreplaceable assets, thus exposing himself to conventional combat of a kind the French were confident they could win. At the same time the French worked to create and expand their own zones of territorial control, where friendly civilians would be safe, and from which enemy cadres could be excluded. Indochina may have been a war without fronts, but it was still a war in which the lines on a map mattered enormously, and in which control of land and the people on it was the key to success.

The densely populated, rabbit-warren terrain of the *casbah* presented a different problem, to which the well-practiced techniques of cordon-and-search and expanding "ink blots" of military control afforded no remedy. The Muslim population of Algiers did not provide the FLN with a territorial base in the usual sense—meaning an area in which it could operate freely and without concealment. Instead it provided concealment for a complex, decentralized network by which the information required to plan and execute their attacks could be transmitted. The French campaign of torture was intended to gain access to that information in sufficiently timely fashion to be tactically useful—a rationale that received brilliant and even sympathetic exposition in Gillo Pontecorvo's celebrated film *The Battle of Algiers*. It is widely echoed in the memoirs and other writings of French officers who took part in the campaign.

The tactical value of torture as a means of securing what we are now condemned to call "actionable intelligence" would not seem to leave much room for dispute in the Algerian case. The use of torture by Americans in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere has inspired a modest outpouring of dissent by professional interrogators, who have argued that such methods are neither necessary nor especially useful in their work.^[4] The Algerian War tells a different story, if not about torture's ability to get at the truth, then certainly about its ability to cripple its targets. The graph above leaves little doubt that the 10th Paras delivered a blow from which the FLN never recovered. The difficulty is that the French did not recover either. They never regained the moral and political legitimacy required to govern Algeria. The question is why not. If torture and terrorism are two sides of the same coin, why should one be so much more difficult than the other to integrate into a war-winning strategy?

Part of the answer is that, while torture and terror may be two sides of the same coin in tactical terms, they both push in the same direction strategically: toward the dissolution of the normative structures that connect state and society. This was a dynamic that some French officers were actively prepared to endorse. From their perspective successful counterinsurgency was not possible unless those engaged in it were prepared to adopt the same unlimited ideological commitments, and the same transgressive methods, as their adversaries. This outlook eventually solidified into a doctrine called *guerre révolutionnaire*—“revolutionary war.”^[5] Torture was integral to its practice, because it expressed an unflinching will to prevail, and helped to even the psychological odds against an adversary who would stop at nothing to get his way.^[6]

Torture in Algeria was thus not merely a means of obtaining information, but also of transmitting it, a form of what today might be called “strategic communication.” And if one may fall back for a moment upon such cant expressions, it seems safe to say that the “message” that torture conveys, not to its victims, but to the mass of uncommitted bystanders whose loyalty is the ultimate prize in any revolutionary struggle, must contradict the strategic purposes of government. Terrorism does not present this problem. Like torture, its effect is determined less by what it accomplishes than by what it symbolizes. But the values that terrorism symbolizes do not obviously contradict the terrorist’s strategic aim. “We stop at nothing” may not be a war-winning message in itself, but it does broadly cohere with the destruction of social and political norms, which is the terrorist’s natural objective.

For a government seeking to affirm and defend those norms, the rejoinder to “We stop at nothing” cannot be “Neither do we.” It can only be “We enforce the law.” Law is the central expression of the most important normative values that any society possesses. Its enforcement need not imply an exaggerated willingness to turn the other cheek. There is nothing to prevent the law from being very tough indeed. But it must remain real law, backed by recognizable rules of evidence, and equally applicable to those who enforce it. The proponents of *guerre révolutionnaire* did not think of themselves as outlaws. On the contrary, they regarded the law as something to defend in spite of itself, and to be returned to its rightful place of honor once order was restored. In the end, that was not enough.

Successful resistance to revolutionary violence requires that law be grasped as a tool and wielded as weapon. “We enforce the law” may not be a war-winning message either, but it has two undoubted advantages that no other can match. First, it has a unique capacity to integrate words and deeds, since it can be recognized as true even by unsympathetic observers. The Brazilian anarchist Abraham Guillén once remarked that “in revolutionary war, any guerrilla action that must be explained to the people is politically useless.”^[7] If anything, the requirement that violence be politically and morally transparent weighs even more heavily on the counter-revolutionary side.

“We enforce the law” is also a message that only a government can send. It is directly constitutive of political authority in a way that less disciplined applications of force, however effective, can never be. This is a reality that cuts both ways, however, and points to the crucial dilemma of revolutionary war: whichever side can claim to enforce the law, and make it stick—that side is the government. If you want to be the government, this is what you must do. The French did not do it in Algeria. They failed to enforce the law in a way that Algerian Muslims could recognize and understand. Their embrace of torture as a central instrument of policy made them active collaborators in the dissolution of the basic norms of Algerian public life, which was the FLN’s only path to victory. To that extent, as Napoleon’s chief enforcer, Joseph Fouché might have said—and he was, after all, a man with outstanding credentials as both a policeman and a terrorist—the French conduct of the Algerian War was worse than a crime. It was a mistake.

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References

1. This is a more general discussion of this proposition in Daniel Moran, "Restraints on Violence and the Reconstruction of International Order after 1945," in [War and Terror in Historical and Contemporary Perspective](#), edited by Michael Geyer. American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, Harry and Helen Gray Humanities Series 14 (2003): 1-19. Online at <http://www.aicgs.org/documents/warandterror.pdf>.
2. See for instance M.L.R. Smith and Peter R. Neumann, *The Strategy of Terrorism: How it Works, and Why it Fails* (London: Routledge, 2007); and Max Abrahms, "Why Terrorism Does Not Work," *International Security* 31, No. 2 (October 2006): 42-78.
3. On the international politics of the Algerian War see Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Irwin M. Wall, *France, the United States, and the Algerian War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
4. See for instance Matthew Alexander and John Bruning, *How to Break a Terrorist: The U.S. Interrogators Who Used Brains, Not Brutality, to Take Down the Deadliest Man in Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2008); and ["Torture is for Amateurs" A Meeting of Psychologists and Military Interrogators](#), Special Issue of *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 13, No. 4 (December 2007). American military lawyers appear to be virtually unanimous in their rejection of torture as either legal or useful. See ["Senate Armed Service Committee Inquiry into the Treatment of Detainees in U.S. Custody,"](#) Executive Summary and Conclusions (11 December 2008), at http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/library/congress/2008_rpt/detainee-treatment_sasc2008.htm. The outstanding general study of torture is Darius Rejali, *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), which is especially interesting in its claim that democratic countries have pioneered techniques of torture that leave no visible scars. See also Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
5. The outstanding theoretical study of *guerre révolutionnaire* remains Peter Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare from Indochina to Algeria: The Analysis of a Political and Military Doctrine* (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1964). See also Christopher Cradock and M. L. R. Smith, "'No Fixed Values': A Reinterpretation of the Influence of the Theory of *Guerre Révolutionnaire* and the Battle of Algiers, 1956-1957," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9, No. 4 (Fall 2007): 68-105, whose notes comprise an excellent survey of the literature on the war as a whole.
6. Whether it actually did even the odds is hard to say. A number of those involved in torture on the French side have written about their experiences, almost always with the frankness one would expect of people who believe they have done nothing wrong. Yet one can only be struck by their near-universal belief that the victims of torture all had it coming (see, for instance, Jacques Massu, *La vraie Bataille d'Alger* (Paris: Plon, 1971), and especially Paul Aussarès, *Services spéciaux: Algérie, 1955-1957* (Paris: Perrin, 2001). Most soldiers do not feel this way. They know that war involves the suffering of innocents, even at their own hands, a fact with which the obligations of duty, and the knowledge of having done it, must help them come to terms. Torturers apparently need to see things differently. For those who worked the electrodes in Algeria, at any rate, it seems to have been important to believe that everyone who crossed their path deserved their fate. In this respect the torturer may have come close to sharing the amoral

universe of the terrorist. But to really share it would have meant embracing the necessity of torturing the innocent as well. This seems to be a psychological bridge that few, if any, were able to cross, perhaps because it leads too obviously in the wrong direction.

7. Abraham Guillén, *Estrategia de la guerrilla urbana* [c. 1971], in Gérard Chaliand, *Guerrilla Strategies: An Historical Anthology from the Long March to Afghanistan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 319.