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Comparing Military Operations in Iraq to the Battle of Algiers

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Outline

Thesis: While no two battles are the same, the actions taken by the French military and FLN insurgents during the Battle of Algiers parallel those taken during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

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Abstract

As in Iraq, a foreign, largely non-Arab military occupied an Arab country. The French forces also faced a protracted insurgency that used extreme and systematic use of terrorism and the insurgents received aid from neighboring countries. In response to these activities, the French built a complex system of barriers that effectively shut Algeria's borders. In the Battle of Algiers, the French mapped out city residents and their social networks. This understanding of the society helped in the successful operation to win control of the capital and shut down bomb-making rings there. They also identified local leaders and then held them accountable if someone in their area attacked the French. Many of these tactics are now in place in Baghdad.

Comparing Military Operations in Iraq to the Battle of Algiers

This paper will compare the military operations conducted by the United States and its coalition force in Iraq to the operations conducted by the French during the Battle of Algiers. This essay will discuss the different tactics used by the French during counterinsurgency operations in Algiers and compare them to the tactics used by the United States and its coalition partners. It will also discuss the successes or failures of the insurgents and the terrorism techniques used in both countries as well as show a contrast between the two operations. The intent of the essay is to show a parallel between the two conflicts.

The Algerian Conflict

In 1954, just prior to France's withdrawal from Vietnam, Algeria's smoldering independence struggle erupted into war. The French, not wanting to abandon its oldest colony, dispatched most of the Foreign Legion to Algeria, and by 1956 over half a million French soldiers were in Algeria. By January 1957, civil authorities relinquished control of the country to the military, and General Jacques Massu, leader of the 10th D.B. (Paratrooper Division), and Colonel Marcel Bigeard were placed in charge with orders to crush the insurgency by any means necessary. After several unsuccessful pushes by the military to rid Algeria of insurgents, two top generals of the French army created the Organization Armée Secrète (OAS—Secret Army Organization), which carried out numerous killings of civilians. This organization reportedly oversaw the systematic use of torture and mass rape of women and children. The generals of this organization never faced charges; in fact, General Bigeard, a colonel in command during the battle of Algiers, became a spokesperson of a parliamentary group disputing the accusations of torture by French soldiers. A large number of veterans that have come forward due to the trauma they experienced from torturing Algerians, however, contradict this. In June of 2000, General Bigeard finally admitted

to the use of torture under his command, although he denies having been personally involved in its use.

By the end of the conflict, more than one million French soldiers had fought in Algeria with over 25,000 French Soldiers dead and 60,000 wounded, while the Algerians suffered over half a million deaths. Despite the tremendous losses, the French parliament did not officially permit the battle of Algiers to be termed a war until October 1999. Prior to that, they only spoke of the events in Algeria as “preserving order” in the provinces (Thull, 2001). With the French Republic insisting that Algiers was a simple operation of public order against National Liberation Front (FLN) terrorism, the military did not consider themselves tied by the Geneva Convention, which prohibits the use of torture and allows access to detainees by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Counter-Insurgent activities

In an attempt to provoke military reprisals, the FLN adopted a policy of genocide: to kill all French without distinction of sex or age. In one instance 37 Europeans, including children were cut to pieces. Men had their arms and legs cut off, children their brains bashed out, and women disemboweled – one pregnant woman had her womb opened, her unborn baby slashed to death and then placed back into the womb. This massacre achieved its objective and General Massu’s paratrooper division received orders to shoot all Arabs and reportedly killed 1273 insurgents, FLN propaganda increased this number to 12000 including mostly innocent civilian women and children. This now became a competition of terror with the commander of the FLN ordering 100 French civilians killed for every execution of an FLN member. Saadi Yacef, a chief FLN insurgent who controlled a network of bomb factories would order all of his operators out of areas in advance to make certain that reprisals by the French would only affect innocent

Muslims. Following these horrendous attacks, the French army lifted all restraints and gave General Massu and his 4600 men absolute freedom of action to clean the FLN out of Algiers.

As in Iraq, a foreign, largely non-Arab military occupied an Arab country. The French forces also faced a protracted insurgency that used "extreme and systematic use of terrorism" and aided by neighboring countries. In response to those conditions, the French built a complex system of barriers that effectively shut Algeria's borders. In the Battle of Algiers, the French mapped out city residents and their social networks. This understanding of the society helped in the successful operation to win control of the capital and shut down bomb-making rings there. They also identified local leaders and then held them accountable if someone in their area attacked the French. Small groups of French soldiers were also stationed among the general population, getting to know the communities they were trying to control. This last tactic is now working in Baghdad.

Once these control measures were in place large scale disappearances of Arabs presumed to be in connection with the FLN began to take place. The French military, which was originally looking for suspect Algerians, came to see all Algerians as suspects. Part of the French's interrogation practices included mass rapes, submerging victims in freezing water or excrement, and repeated use of electric shock. They also threw hundreds of prisoners into the sea, from the port of Algiers or by helicopter death flights. When questioned about the numerous cases of ill treatment and torture of prisoners a French colonel stated, "The struggle against terrorism makes it necessary to resort to certain questioning techniques as the only way of saving human life and avoiding new attacks." Reports show that the French used torture as part of psychological warfare rather than to gain any relevant information. Their aim of torture was not to make people talk, but to affect the population as a whole (Branche, 2004). This however backfired on

them due to Algeria having not only a large Arab population, but a significantly large white population as well. This resulted in public outcry and finally the lost of public support in France.

Iraq Comparison

Declaration of Victory

The French also declared victory shortly after the battle begun only to find themselves fighting insurgents' years after the declaring the battle won. As with the Algerian war, the battle in Iraq is operating on Arab soil by non-Arab military forces wishing to regain control of cities such as Baghdad and Fallujah, which are the focal points of insurgent resistance. Both wars have concentrated on local success within the cities and neither could stop mounting insurgent attacks on Muslim non-combatants loyal to their efforts. The same massacres of Muslims who support the western troops, the same failure to inflict disabling setbacks on the enemy, the same inability to identify the source of hostile supplies and recruits, and the same sense of frustration in the American leadership at its failure to end this situation apply today. Another similarity may include the increase of American firepower and the climbing toll of Iraqi dead, many of them innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire.

Terrorizing of Prisoners

While the French and the U.S. made impressive tactical gains both failed to gain the support of the people or the separate religious factions. In Iraq, frustrated with the rising use of terror attacks, the U.S. military has pushed aggressively for more and better intelligence and in the process; it has ignored its own regulations against extreme forms of coercion. The most troubling comparison would be the loss of discipline by U.S. forces. A few examples are the terrorizing of an Iraqi prisoner by an Army battalion commander, American Soldiers dumping a pair of Iraqi detainees of a bridge into the Tigris River and of course, the incidents at Abu Ghraib

prison. Finally as in Algiers, the U.S. is also facing the struggle between different religious factions fighting for control of certain regions of the country (Carroll 2007).

Iraq Contrasts

The Algerian and Iraqi insurgencies are different as are the French and American military forces and their strategic goals. The French went in with an overwhelming force determined to take permanent control of Algeria. The U.S. did not have enough Soldiers in country initially to stabilize the provinces once the fighting was complete. The U.S. does not plan to take permanent control of Iraq. Some 500,000 French soldiers occupied a country of 9 million Algerians aided by skilled Algerian soldiers called Harkis. In Iraq there are roughly 150,000 troops in a country of about 26 million where efforts to train strong, nationalist-minded Iraqi security forces have had spotty results. The U.S. was not initially prepared to deal with the fighting amongst the different religious sects. The FLN in Algeria was able to eventually unite other anti-French faction stopping the insurgents from killing each other and focus their efforts on the French. There were no religious differences in Algeria as they are in Iraq, the insurgents are not unified; The Shiites and the Sunnis are killing each other (Grose 2007).

Unlike the Iraqi insurgency, that unity helped Algerian insurgent leaders develop a strong campaign to undermine political support for the French occupation. They established formal diplomatic ties with other African and Asian countries and pushed the United Nations to help end the war and grant Algeria independence. There were also attacks in France proper by Algerian insurgents that killed some 5,000 people, to frighten France and make them stop the war. Finally, the level of torture and the disappearances are not taking place in Iraq. The French faced major unrest at home over the Battle of Algiers ultimately resulting in their withdrawal from the country. While the U.S. has faced criticism, the country has not seen the level of unrest

faced by France and the citizens of the United States while not happy with operations in Iraq still maintain their support for the Troops (Carroll 2007).

Counter Argument

While there may be lessons to take from the Algerian conflict, research also shows that these conflicts are as different as the Soldiers and insurgents that fought them. The French went in with an overwhelming force assisted by skilled Algerian soldiers called harkis and were able to secure the borders. The U.S. went into Iraq with roughly 150,000 Soldiers and with the troop surge is still unable to secure Iraq's borders. In Iraq there are many groups with religious differences fighting against American occupation where as the French did not face these religious differences. The insurgents in Iraq are unable to unify against the Americans, which is how the FLN was finally able to gain ground against the French. Finally, the French's systematic use of torture and killings contributed to their loss of political support at home. While they were able to defeat the Algerian guerrillas militarily, support at home caused them to lose the political battle, which ultimately called for their withdrawal. The U.S. has faced criticism from the American public, but not at the level of the French and while there has been several incidents where Soldiers have lost their discipline and committed criminal acts against Iraqis, they are not even close in comparison to the horrendous acts committed by the French during the Battle of Algiers.

Conclusion

During the Battle of Algiers, both sides committed horrific atrocities: acts of terrorism, including mutilations and bombings, by the FLN, harsh, indiscriminate reprisals by French forces, including the state-sanctioned torture of suspects. Terror groups throughout the Mideast including al Qaeda learned the efficacy of insurgent terror from the tactics used by the FLN because they proved that terrorism, skillfully used by a relative handful of guerrillas, could

overcome larger, stronger but more conventional armies. While the Iraqis may not be experiencing the same form of reprisal as the Algerians, evidence shows that the acts of terrorism committed by the insurgents are relatively the same. Muslims considered pro-French were subjected by the FLN to mutilation torture and slow deaths. As in Iraq today, the terrorists particularly infiltrated and killed Muslim police forces and supporters of the U.S.

In closing, while the actions of the French in Algeria and the United States in Iraq may not be completely stark in comparison, the conflicts themselves and the actions of the insurgents in each operation resemble each other. The information discussed in this paper show that the Battle of Algiers and the conflict in Iraq do parallel each other.

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