The Battle of Algiers

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It would be remiss of us to discuss terrorism without speaking of the Front de Libération Nationale, or National Liberation Front—the FLN of Algeria. The organization holds a very important place in terrorism’s history, for at least two reasons: The first is that they created an extensive organized network by which to operate, one that is seen as a model for many others who come after, and the second is that they were successful in their endeavors, at least in attaining their set goals. Here we will discuss a bit of the context that contributed to the rise of the FLN and what necessitated their organizational structure, how the structure actually worked along with the advantages it brought, and then the disadvantages and examples of how the structure failed the FLN in certain ways, and how their disadvantages were acted upon. Lastly, a few points will be made on how the FLN could perhaps have performed better.

It is important to note the circumstances that brought the FLN into being and what forced them to adopt such an experimental system. First and foremost, the country of Algeria had previously been a territory of the Ottoman Empire before being taken over by the French, which by the time of the “Battle of Algiers,” had been under their control for more than a century. The French implemented a policy of settling areas in Algeria, mostly along the coast with their own people but some Italians and Spaniards as well; however, the settled population by and large remained French. Following the end of the Second World War, where France had been occupied by Nazi Germany and was mostly recognized in the form of the Vichy French who collaborated with the Germans, with the French returned to power and in the process of rebuilding, riots broke out in Algeria, protesting the Vichy government for their collaboration with the occupying power, viewing them as just the same as the Nazis. This rift would remain, compounded by the fact there was already a divide between the French and the “French Muslims” as they liked to call their Algerian citizens, now with many of the merits of citizenship revoked. This divide would continue to exist and even strengthen with news from French Indochina, where the people there were somewhat successful in driving out the French. This led to an increasing call for independence within Algeria. Several movements began to form, though they bickered amongst themselves over how best to attain what they wanted. The FLN and their military branch, the ALN, would become the dominant and most powerful faction, where a cycle between the FLN and the French of death and terror would begin, with the “Ultras,” right-wing colonial extremists would begin committing attacks on both the Muslims and at times the French government, examples of false-flag operations, blaming the Muslim population for those attacks as well as other undesirables like communists. The Muslims would then retaliate against the French, bombing targets as well as shooting police and organizing civil unrest, and the French in turn would retaliate to these FLN retaliations by sending in troops such as the para-commandos and the Zouaves to search the Casbah, the Muslim quarter. This series of retaliations on both sides, and the subsequent searching of the Casbah, would help to cement the system by which the FLN would operate, though the organization had been using this structure for quite some time now.

The structure in question was the “cell” structure. In The Battle of Algiers, Colonel Mathieu briefs and instructs his men on how the organization works, where the organization has a leader but begins to branch off as it enlists more and more members. Starting with the leader, who knows his two subordinates and is aware of the organization as a whole, he hands orders down to his lieutenants, who in turn have people who are subordinate to them. One may look at this however
and think it looks like your typical hierarchy; however, this is most definitely not the case. The organization may have a head and subordinates, but each set of members functions as their own “cell” or working group, semi-autonomous in their workings. The cell will carry out orders passed down from a higher-ranked member, or the leader of the cell will plot actions and put these concepts into practice in whatever manner they think best serves the overall goal of the organization. These could be everything from small secretary work and courier work, to more complex plots like demonstrations and bombings. Cells were encouraged to meet their challenges in unique ways and with creative solutions, thus the activities of one cell were not necessarily going to follow the same methodology as another cell, making it harder to trace cells and at the same time confuse their enemies. Cells were also not strictly limited to the 3-person system shown in the film—they could have multiple members but tended to stay small.

At the beginning of Zohra Drif’s memoir, Inside the Battle of Algiers, she recounted how at first she would only know her friend Samia Lakhdari, the two of them only recently inducted into the organization, and their contact, “Brassens” as they called him. “Brassens” would in turn report to somebody they dubbed “The Desert Fox,” real name Mustapha Fettal.ii Later on, their connections would come to include some of the highest-ranked members of the FLN such as Ali la Pointe and Saadi Yacef, as well as Larbi Ben M’hidi. Thus, even in an organization as large as the FLN, they were decentralized and members were not likely to know a full roster of who was in the organization; only when it was necessary were other members revealed. This was in an attempt to limit the potential damage that could be inflicted upon the organization. If one cell’s leader died, someone within the cell would take charge, or they could find somebody else who was competent and able enough to take over. This extended all the way to their leaders, as even when Ben M’hidi was arrested and found dead, the organization surely felt the pain but did not back down, perhaps only intensified, seeing M’hidi as a martyr. This event was of great enough import that both the film, The Battle of Algiers, and Drif’s own memoir discuss this.iii iv In addition to being hard to track and hard to crush completely, the FLN also had great sway with the local peoples of the Casbah, potentially because they left a small footprint where they set up shop. Though they endangered whoever they were hosted by, they did not require a large amount of space for a single cell to operate—only an apartment was required per cell, and the construction of bomb labs and safe houses did not require a massive complex to house them. The nature of the homes in the Casbah, being small and compartmentalized, complimented the FLN, whose cells could have the same said of them. Thus, this footprint and pledging to help the people would afford them support almost anywhere they went within the Casbah, in providing a host family and location as well as sustenance and resources for a cell’s members.

The cell structure, as undoubtedly effective and robust as it was, was not without its shortcomings. There is no perfect system, and the FLN was no exception. In exchange for their guile and small footprint, their ability to lose a section while being able to replenish that loss effectively as well as their ability to maneuver with relative stealth and discretion, they did have their weaknesses in that they lacked an up-front strength when compared to the Colonial Army. Members maintained weapons, but did not use them to effect large ambushes and assaults—their use of infantry weapons were more for defense in case their cells were compromised and they needed to regroup elsewhere. The FLN was not interested in fighting the French on a battlefield, not in Algiers. Nor were they interested in fighting a protracted war with the French, as a war of attrition is one of the greatest threats to an organization like the FLN. Because they were fighting on unequal footing, using alternative methods of attack, the FLN were largely stripped for resources. The French simply kept applying pressure onto the FLN, raiding their cell locations repeatedly. Over time, the French managed to start bringing down the total operating cells, vastly diminishing the capacity with which the FLN could act. Though the FLN were determined to the end, it was clear that eventually they would run out of resources, run out of places to hide, and run out of people capable of continuing the
fight. They began to slow down, constantly being hounded by the French, moving from safe house to safe house with little time to rest and recuperate, which drained their members of their vitality, becoming sleep-deprived and ill. Zohra Drif would recount one such flight in her memoir:

El Kho had sent Petit Omar to find us new accommodation, but there had been no response. Thanks to Massu’s policy of terror, we were seeing our possibilities for refuge dry up. Finally, a departure plan was set. But it was Ramadan, and at this hour the streets of the Casbah were swarming with people and patrols. They decided that Ali and El Kho would wrap themselves in *haïks* to try to conceal their identity. Despite our fatigue, despite the dejection and sorrow we felt, the process of Hassiba and me trying to fix a *haïk* onto Ali’s athletic frame cheered us all up.

In addition to their physical fatigue, the cell members began to feel mental torpor from the repeated raids upon their homes by the Paras, as well as the ever-constant threat of being tortured, something the Colonial Army used extensively in an attempt to extract more information from the populace, but more as a weapon to terrorize them, to induce this mental and emotional fatigue, to instill this fear to break the morale of the FLN and the FLN’s supporters. In the end, what truly dealt a lethal blow to the FLN’s presence in Algiers was the fact that one of their own had betrayed them and sided with the French, a leading member of the ALN by the codename of Safi. He was responsible for getting Drif and Yacef into French custody, and for acting as the bait to draw out Ali la Pointe and Hassiba Ben Bouali, where a French-plantated bomb destroyed their current safe house, killing them as well as Petit Omar and Mahmoud Bouhamidi. His betrayal allowed the French to gain intimate knowledge of how the ALN and the FLN worked, giving them precise locations of other cells and their activities, bringing down the whole organization.

Though a strong and efficient organizational structure leaving little to chance, the FLN and ALN were eventually brought down by the French war of attrition, through depletion of resources, wearing-down of their members so that they would become more reckless, and a mole on the inside providing in-depth information on their movements, their activities and their refuges, as well as the current level of equipment that the FLN and ALN members were working with. An unknowable enemy became a knowable one, and the French set about dismantling them with this knowledge in hand. The FLN never intended to outlast the French in a protracted battle—that was the job of the people, to rise up and join them and throw a full revolt against the French, as well as earn recognition on the international stage to win some support from other countries. Though this did indeed come later and won the Algerians their independence, it came after the FLN had their cells scattered. The damage was done, but if the FLN perhaps addressed the problems that began to plague them later on, either through planning or further outmaneuvering the French, then maybe they could have continued their fight alongside the forces that would win them independence. For example, during the phase where the Paras were raiding the FLN in the Casbah, another cell could work in collaboration to create a diversion to draw the French away, possibly acting as a warning to the French that every time they attempted to raid the Casbah, a retaliatory strike would occur at nearly the same time in a French-controlled part of the city. This could act to leverage the raids, with the potential of a strike making the French more wary of sending further raids into the Casbah, which in turn would allow the FLN and the ALN more time to stock up, move resources and regroup. Whatever happened and could have happened—either way, the FLN proved their ingenuity with their new organizational structure and the manner in which they took the fight to the French while staying operational, longer than a typical terrorist group of the time would manage, and achieving their goal of a free Algeria while also providing both a role model for later organizations of the same kind, and a valuable lesson to be learned from the French in how to conduct counter-terrorism.
ii Zohra Drif, Inside the Battle of Algiers. (Charlottesville: Just World Books, 2017), 76.
iv Drif, Inside, 235.
v Drif, Inside, 250.
vi Drif, Inside, 315.
vii Drif, Inside, 332.