

RESEARCH
ARTICLEGeneral De Gaulle's Policy Towards the Algerian Liberation
Revolution (1958–1962)

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Abstract

General Charles de Gaulle sought to suppress the Algerian Revolution through a series of political, social, economic, and military projects. On October 4, 1958, he announced the Constantine Plan. From the French perspective, this plan was economic, social, and cultural in nature. However, Algerians viewed it as a colonial project aimed at thwarting the revolution, distancing the Algerian people from it, and primarily separating them from the National Liberation Army, while convincing them of the need to integrate into France. Militarily, General Challe was appointed as the commander-in-chief of the military forces in Algeria. He presented a military strategy to eradicate the Algerian Revolution, known as the Challe Plan. This plan involved military operations that acted as a crushing machine, sweeping across the entire Algerian territory, alongside an intensive program targeting guerrilla warfare.

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Introduction

The military coup of May 13, 1958, carried out by generals in Algeria and supported by the *pieds-noirs* (French settlers), hastened the appointment of General de Gaulle on June 1, 1958. The French National Assembly granted

its confidence to the new president, who, upon his appointment, called on the Assembly to grant him exceptional powers. These were intended to rescue France and its policies from the deteriorating conditions caused by the Algerian War of Liberation, which de Gaulle considered a war of attrition threatening the very fabric of the French nation.

His policy in Algeria was centered around the principle of *fraternity*, a concept embedded within the broader framework of his vision of *French Algeria*. This vision was notably embodied in his ambitious initiative, the Constantine Plan, which he unveiled in a speech delivered in the city of Constantine on October 3, 1958. In addition to this project, he issued a personal appeal to the leaders and fighters of the National Liberation Army on October 23, 1958, which he termed the “Peace of the Braves.”

First: The Coup of May 13, 1958

The growing military dominance over administrative affairs in Algeria encouraged the *pieds-noirs* (European settlers) to align themselves with the military forces and cling to the notion of French Algeria, rejecting any contact with the National Liberation Front (FLN) and opposing all political solutions that might threaten their interests. Thus, they chose General de Gaulle, the historical and loyal figure who refused to accept France’s defeat, as their candidate. His return was announced by military leaders on May 13, 1958, at 8:30 p.m. from the balcony of the *Gouvernement Général* building in Algiers, before a large crowd of Europeans who enthusiastically celebrated the general’s ascension to power.ⁱ

These developments pushed the *pieds-noirs* to demand a change in Paris itself. They called on the new Pflimlin government to form a Ministry of Public Security, especially after the National Liberation Army executed three French soldiers—a move that deeply angered the settlers and the generals. As a result, Robert Lacoste was forced to vacate his office in Algeria on May 10, 1958, particularly after learning that his name had not been included in the new government’s lineup.

The rapid escalation of events led the military officers to hasten the seizure of power by forming the Committee of Public Safety on the night of May 13–14. This movement was led by Massu and Salan, with the support of Jacques Soustelle, who arrived in Algeria on May 18, 1958.ⁱⁱ

In Paris, news of the military coup spread, initially receiving little approval—until the appointment of General de Gaulle as head of the French government on June 1, 1958, followed by his visit to Algeria on June 4, 1958, during which he famously declared: “*I have understood you.*”ⁱⁱⁱ

He then addressed the native Algerian population with the following words: “*From now on, France considers the inhabitants of Algeria as one single people. There are only French citizens, with equal rights and equal duties... This means that the means of subsistence will be granted to those who did not previously have access to them.*”^{iv}

Second: The Political Aspect

1. The Issue of Integration with France

This referred to restoring equality in rights and duties among all Algerians—Muslims, *pieds-noirs* (European settlers), and Jews. De Gaulle favored this idea, as he believed that implementing it would create multiple opportunities for Algerians to access political, administrative, judicial, and governmental positions. Integration, in de Gaulle’s vision, would also allow Algerians to benefit from the same privileges enjoyed by citizens of mainland France.^v

2. The Idea of Fraternity

This was a political concept embedded in de Gaulle’s strategy in Algeria. Through it, he sought—somewhat manipulatively—to establish formal equality between Algerians and *pieds-noirs* in terms of rights and duties. His underlying goal was to portray Algerians as French citizens in order to gain their votes in the presidential elections of December 1958.^{vi}

3. French Algeria

This concept had been embraced by France's early colonizers in 1830, and de Gaulle himself expressed support for it in his memoirs, stating: *"Historical men such as de Bourmont, Bugeaud, and Clauzel exerted great efforts to annex Algeria to France, and it is unreasonable for this colony to be lost under our government..."* De Gaulle applied this concept practically through the referendum on the Fifth Republic's Constitution held on September 28, 1958. Algeria participated in this referendum just like any other French territorial district. Algerians, however, voted under coercion and fear—unlike the populations in other colonies, such as West and Central Africa, who voted freely on whether to remain within or separate from the French Union.^{vi}

4. The "Peace of the Braves"

This was the appeal de Gaulle addressed on October 23, 1958 to the National Liberation Army (ALN) and all its factions, including political elements, urging them to surrender as soon as possible by raising white flags. In this call, he said: *"Those who started the fighting must now end it... They must return to their homes and families. Their leaders must contact our military commanders using white flags. As for the external delegation of the Revolution, they must go to the French embassies in Tunis or Rabat so that they can be transported to France to negotiate the terms of surrender within a French framework. The political future of Algeria is not subject to discussion, as it was already determined by the referendum of September 28, 1958."* After the failure of this first phase of his policy, de Gaulle moved to the second: self-determination for the Algerian people, beginning with his statement of September 16, 1959, in which he recognized, for the first time, the Algerians' right to determine their own destiny and accepted full responsibility for the consequences.^{vii}

5. The Issue of Separation from France

The idea of separation from France was a central goal of the National Liberation Front and Army. De Gaulle fundamentally despised this idea because it clashed with his policy in Algeria and undermined France's strategic interests. He regarded separation as a descent into chaos that would enable the spread of communism. De Gaulle emphasized that if a majority of Algerians opted for separation, then France would continue to support those segments of the population wishing to remain French. These groups could be gathered under French authority, and France would retain exclusive control over Algeria's oil.^{ix}

6. "Algeria for Algerians"

This was a political slogan coined by General Charles de Gaulle, aimed at marginalizing the National Liberation Front and establishing an Algeria without it. This plan began in July 1960, when he assembled a committee of 120 individuals comprising members of the Senate, Parliament, regional councils, chambers of commerce and agriculture, mayors, and selected advisors. For this purpose, four subcommittees were established:

- The first committee was tasked with agricultural reform and implementing the agricultural provisions of the Constantine Plan;
- The second committee was responsible for local financial reform;
- The third committee focused on administrative reform and the organization of central structures;
- The fourth committee was assigned to explore mechanisms for creating sectarian and ethnic groupings as a prelude to the future partitioning of Algeria.

Third: The Military Dimension

1. The Challe Military Plan

General de Gaulle appointed General Challe as Commander-in-Chief of French forces in Algeria in September 1958. Challe visited Algeria during October and November 1958 and began to consider a military strategy aimed at crushing the Algerian Revolution. The plan involved gathering all available French reserve forces in Algeria, concentrating them in a specific region, and encircling the National Liberation Army (ALN) units operating there in order to "cleanse" the area. The aim was also to locate and destroy arms depots, food supplies, and ammunition caches, as well as eliminate the administrative structures of the ALN. At the same time, air and artillery forces were

used to monitor and bomb the targeted area, while tanks were deployed to blockade roads and main access routes.

Operations would begin by encircling a large area within a wide perimeter, which would then be gradually tightened. Once one area was “cleansed,” the same operations and efforts would be redirected to another zone. However, in most cases, when French forces arrived, they would find the area empty of fighters, who had withdrawn to avoid confrontation. France would then declare the zone “liberated” and often proceeded to mistreat civilians, portraying them as ALN casualties.^x

2. Total Strength of Colonial Forces Stationed in Algeria as of July 1, 1959

- Ground forces: 392,500
- Naval forces: 10,900
- Air forces: 31,500
- Gendarmerie: 13,100
- Sectoral Unit Forces: 78,500
- Harkis (auxiliary Algerian forces): 39,850 (reached 54,000 by the end of 1959)
- Special Mobile Groups (GMS): 8,720
- *Mokhazni* units: 18,520 (reached 19,000 by the end of 1959)
- Self-defense forces: 18,810 (reached 25,000 by the end of 1959)

Total: 633,016

Challe's plan, supporting the implementation of military operations, can be summarized as follows:

- **Reinforcement of the electrified Morice Line:** Challe noted the Morice Line's failure to stop the National Liberation Army. Thus, in 1959, he reinforced it by adding a parallel line known as the “Challe Line,” located 70 km away on both the eastern and western fronts. The primary objective was to cut off supplies to the revolutionary forces inside Algeria.^{xi}
- **Creation of internment camps:** In 1959, France established over 2,500 internment camps in Algeria, forcibly relocating tens of thousands of civilians. These camps were enclosed with barbed wire and surrounded by military, police, gendarmerie, *harkis*, local militias, and officers of Native Affairs. The population was subjected to hunger, repression, and forced labor. France labeled these camps as “safe zones.” Their purpose was to deprive the revolutionaries of food and shelter, monitor the population, and prevent any contact between civilians and ALN fighters. The French forces burned villages and hamlets to prevent return, especially targeting those who refused to evacuate. More than 8,000 villages were burned during the execution of the Challe Plan, and the number of civilians forced into these camps reached 3 million.^{xii}
- **The *Harkis* and Algerian conscripts:** Challe insisted that his plan could only succeed through the involvement of loyal Algerians who would monitor the population, collect intelligence, and infiltrate local communities. He launched a program to train Algerian Muslim officers to support French commandos. Some of these recruits were sent to French military academies in Strasbourg and elsewhere for training, before integrating into the French army to facilitate operations among the general population. The core tasks of these Algerian units were to seduce the population through various means, highlight the benefits of France, and intimidate and terrify civilians in order to dissuade them from supporting the revolution.^{xiii}
- **Psychological warfare:** Challe relied on the support of the Fifth Bureau, which specialized in psychological operations aimed at winning over the local population and distancing Muslims from the revolutionaries. This

bureau used Muslim conscripts and sought to entice women and children through various methods, including propaganda posters, audiovisual tools, and showcasing the “civilizing” role of France. Coercive tactics were also widely used: the bureau applied psychological torture on civilians using numerous methods, such as torturing parents in front of their children and vice versa, without the slightest regard for ethics or humanity.^{xiv}

3. Major French Military Operations

These operations were launched after General de Gaulle came to power and appointed General Challe as Commander-in-Chief of the military forces in Algeria. Challe presented de Gaulle with a military plan aimed at eliminating the Algerian Revolution. The plan consisted of large-scale military operations described as a *steamroller* (Rouleau Compresseur), launched in sweeping movements across the entire Algerian territory. These relied heavily on intelligence gathering, tracking National Liberation Army (ALN) fighters, monitoring the civilian population, and implementing an intensive program carried out by more than 600,000 soldiers, including paratroopers, infantry, and other specialists in guerrilla warfare. These operations were also backed by significant military equipment, including aircraft and armored vehicles.

By the end of 1959, the military situation for the National Liberation Army had become critical. The year 1959 was considered the harshest of the war.^{xv}

The operations targeted all provinces (*wilayas*) of the country and followed the same strategy with shared objectives, including:

- **Operation Couronne (The Crown)** (February 6, 1959): Covered the Fifth Wilaya and part of the Fourth.
- **Operation Courroie (The Belt)** (1959): Covered the Fourth Wilaya and part of the Sixth.
- **Operation Jumelles (The Twins)** (July 22, 1959): Covered the Third Wilaya, part of the Fourth, the Second, and the First.
- **Operation Pierres Précieuses (Precious Stones)** (September 6, 1959): Covered the Second Wilaya, the Eastern Base, and part of the First.
- **Operation Étincelles (Sparks)** (1959): Covered parts of the Sixth, Fourth, Third, and First Wilayas.
- **Operation Brumaine (Fog)** (October 1959): Covered the Third Wilaya and parts of the Fourth, Second, and First.
- **Operation Flammèche (Flame)** (June 1960): Covered the Sixth and First Wilayas.
- **Operation Cigale (Cicada)** (July 1960): Covered the Fourth, Sixth, and Fifth Wilayas.
- **Operation Prident (The Pitchfork)** (October 4, 1960): Targeted the First Wilaya.
- **Operation Marathon** (1960): Targeted the Algerian-Tunisian border.^{xvi}

General Challe's Assessment of the Impact of Military Operations on the National Liberation Army

Despite the surprise attacks launched by colonial forces on the National Liberation Army (ALN) in the Fifth Wilaya, particularly in the sparsely mountainous area of Mascara, the ALN managed to withstand these brutal operations. It reorganized its battalions into smaller units in order to engage in long-term guerrilla warfare. Strategic field plans were developed across all Wilayas and regions, forming the core of the National Liberation Army's military strategy against the French operations.^{xvii}

General Challe himself acknowledged the strength and resilience of the ALN, which had the upper hand in guerrilla warfare. He expressed astonishment at the speed with which ALN units moved and their fierce resistance to French commando forces. He was impressed by the unity of the revolutionary military system and the strategy it

pursued—clear evidence of cohesion within the ranks of the ALN.^{xviii}

Challe recorded several observations, including that the ALN units remained cohesive and retained their combat effectiveness. He remained puzzled by the ALN's unity and its close bond with the people, as well as their joint defiance of colonial strategies aimed at isolating the population from the revolution and confining them in guarded camps. He also noted the continued organization of the political structure among the civilian population, its sustained political activity, and ongoing logistical connections with the eastern and western borders to supply the revolution with military equipment. In the end, he presented an evaluative report on the revolutionary Wilayas that detailed the major battles fought by the ALN following the conclusion of military operations.^{xix}

Operation Couronne (The Crown)

General Challe preferred to begin applying this operation in the Fifth Wilaya and part of the Fourth, in the Ouarsenis Mountains, focusing particularly on the border between the two. Colonial forces began by separating the people from the ALN, aiming to starve the population and impose an economic blockade to cut off supplies to the fighters, forcing them into slow death and ultimately into surrender.

Over 50,000 soldiers participated in the operation, targeting an area that was mostly devoid of mountains, such as the Mascara region, which they surrounded and bombarded. Napalm was used as retaliation for the army's failures against the ALN, and to force civilians into internment camps.^{xx}

Operation Courroie (The Belt)

After the completion of Operation Couronne in the Fifth Wilaya and part of the Fourth, colonial forces launched Operation Courroie. They began by massacring women, children, and the elderly who refused to go to the internment centers. Their graves are scattered along the borders of the two Wilayas.

Operation Courroie covered vast areas of the Fourth Wilaya, especially the Blidean Atlas Mountains, the Titteri region, and the mountains of Tenès and Zaccar. This time, the French forces encountered ALN guerrilla units that carried out swift hit-and-run operations, resulting in many victories for the revolutionaries and defeats for the colonial army. This success was largely due to the ALN's intimate knowledge of the mountainous terrain and battlefield conditions, as well as their ability to track enemy movements precisely—skills that had been strengthened through experience during Operation Couronne.^{xxi}

Operation Jumelles (The Twins)

This operation began on July 22, 1959, and marked a decisive stage in the French attempt to crush the revolution in the Third Wilaya, as well as parts of the Fourth, Second, and First Wilayas. The operation attracted significant attention in the French press. It covered a vast area stretching from Dellys to eastern Béjaïa, and from Bouira southward to Guenzet.

Helicopters and over 35,000 soldiers were deployed. French troops spread through Mount Akfadou, while naval forces secured the coastline and tanks and armored vehicles blocked the roads. The operation targeted ALN units and involved besieging towns and villages within the area, preventing inhabitants from entering or leaving, and conducting house-to-house searches. The goal was to sever all contact between the ALN and the population.

General Challe personally directed the operation, assisted by General Faure, General Delbert, and General Youni.^{xxii}

Operation Pierres Précieuses (Precious Stones)

No sooner had Operation Jumelles ended than Operation Pierres Précieuses began, covering the Second Wilaya, part of the First, and the Eastern Base. The Second Wilaya was characterized by continuous mountain chains and had already eliminated many colonial outposts in the mountains at an early stage. It also learned from the previous resistance efforts in the Third and Fourth Wilayas, which helped it better prepare for the assault.

As a result, the colonial forces achieved little beyond brutalizing the population, burning villages, and forcibly relocating civilians to internment camps. The ALN command responded by reorganizing its troops into smaller

units capable of carrying out swift and surprise attacks, cutting off French movement and impeding their operations.^{xxiii}

The Strategy of the National Liberation Army in Confronting French Military Operations

The National Liberation Army (ALN) adopted well-calculated plans to face the new military situation, which saw France mobilizing all its forces and seeking support from NATO. The key elements of the ALN's counter-strategy can be summarized as follows:

The army units were redeployed to areas not affected by French military operations, with some crossing into neighboring Wilayas. For instance, the Fifth Wilaya moved units from the open area of Mascara to the Ouarsenis Mountains in the Fourth Wilaya.

Some battalions were assigned to engage in prolonged battles in various regions, lasting up to two weeks, organizing ambushes and direct engagements with the enemy to divert its attention and create confusion—thus relieving pressure on other regions. This tactic was exemplified by Colonel Si Mohamed Bouguera, who mobilized the Karima, Hossainia, and Zoubeiria battalions, tasking them with a series of confrontations and engagements to disorient the enemy and support other Mujahideen.^{xxiv}

Orders were issued to the *fedayeen* to intensify their operations against French units in towns and villages. Efforts were also made to cut roads and communication lines, blow up trains and railway tracks, burn plantations, and cripple the colonial economy.

Supplies and medical stocks were stored and secured in locations far from the conflict zones and relocated when necessary. Civilian support personnel (*mousabiline*) and intelligence agents were strategically distributed to monitor enemy movements, track its deployments, estimate troop numbers, and identify opportunities for ambushing mobile units.

The ALN also restructured its battalions into small, agile units capable of rapid deployment and stealth. It adopted a policy of evacuating locations targeted by colonial forces, avoiding direct confrontation unless necessary, and ensuring mutual support between units when needed.^{xxv}

Mine warfare became a major focus. Mines were planted densely along routes commonly used by the enemy. Heavy weapons unsuited for guerrilla warfare were stored away, while ambushes and hit-and-run attacks were doubled.

The ALN relied on light arms for tactical surprise attacks and made effective and advanced use of mines and hand grenades. Strategic emphasis was placed on attacking colonial infrastructure and public property in order to undermine the colonial Constantine Plan.

Key tactics included surprise, speed, concealment, and maintaining unit cohesion and discipline. Mujahideen forces were instructed to evacuate areas targeted for encirclement by colonial troops, leaving the space empty and exiting the danger zone before the siege could close around them.^{xxvi}

Conclusion

General de Gaulle sought to suffocate the Algerian Revolution politically, socially, and economically. French military operations against the National Liberation Army (ALN), led by General Challe, expanded in scale. However, this approach failed in the face of the unwavering unity and resilience of both the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the ALN. This failure convinced General de Gaulle—after being elected president of the Fifth Republic in early 1959—of the need to pursue a parallel solution, embodied in the idea of self-determination, which he first proposed in his statement on 16 September 1959.

The self-determination referendum placed his policy before three possibilities: integration with France, separation from France, or a federal relationship with France.

De Gaulle's policy in Algeria ultimately concluded with the acceptance of the principle of self-determination to be exercised by the Algerians themselves. This came at the beginning of 1961, when he began promoting the notion

of “Algeria for the Algerians,” along with his famous statement, “I have understood you.” However, the demonstrations of 11 December 1960 reaffirmed the Algerian people's unwavering support for their sole legitimate representative, the National Liberation Front, which had consistently demanded full and uncompromising independence.

This marked the beginning of a new phase: negotiations, through which de Gaulle sought to preserve France's dignity and avoid a second military defeat in Algeria, akin to the Dien Bien Phu defeat in Indochina.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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