

From Algeria to Iraq

by John W. Kiser

Thoughts on the applicability of the French colonial experience in Algeria to fighting Islamic insurgencies.

This article explores the relevance of the French experience in Algeria to fighting Islamic insurgencies today. The ideas presented below are a byproduct of researching the subject of a book in progress, *The Arab Who Conquered France: The Life and Times of Emir Abdelkader (1807–1883)*. Abdelkader was a Sufi turned jihadist following an inept “liberation” of the Arab population in the Regency of Algiers.¹ The sincerity with which he lived his faith in war and in exile, his nobility of spirit, and humanistic Islam ultimately won him admirers all over the world, but especially in France, whose generals fought him for 15 years.

Background

French soldiers first set foot in Algeria in the summer of 1830—officially a punitive expedition to avenge an insult to France’s honor and promote the cause of Christian civilization. It also served as a convenient political distraction from the domestic problems of an unpopular monarchy. Turkish rule over Algeria quickly collapsed, leaving the French unsure about what to do next. After 10 years of internal debate and hesitation about its purposes in Algeria, France decided on a total war approach. This required the subjugation of the entire country, the commitment of 100,000 troops (in a country with 3 million inhabitants), and 7 more years of savage fighting. What France won, in reality, was a truce—the first of many in a cultural conflict that lasted 132 years and which France ultimately lost.

During the first phase of the war (1830 to 1841), the French Army faced a situation similar to that of the United States currently in Iraq—mixed feelings toward the new occupier (generally benevolent at first); ignorance of the terrain, languages, and religion; and ethnic and tribal complexities. Initially, French soldiers/conscripts suffered high losses from malaria, cholera, dysentery, and desertion and did not bear up well under the physical stress of heat and fatigue. Lack of trustworthy and capable translators who knew the right dialects was also a great problem. Failure of generals to keep promises to respect Muslim property and mosques, uncertainty of purpose, and harsh and misdirected reprisals gradually alienated much of the population.

The United States may not intend to physically colonize Iraq as France did Algeria, but like France, it has declared its desire to culturally transform the society according to its own ideas. Even if U.S. expectations about transformation are much reduced today, like France, America’s success or failure will depend ultimately on the attitudes adopted toward Iraqis—that is, their culture, traditions, and sense of self-respect. Many tribes welcomed the French in Algeria and were happy to cooperate on the basis of mutual respect and improved security for themselves. But greed, contempt for Arabs and their

culture, and the French sense of national vanity all got in the way of equitable coexistence. It is not yet clear if the United States will repeat France's mistakes.

French Successes

The French were quite successful in using native troops—the Zouaves in particular—and from that experience, they built relationships with tribal leaders around the area. Those relationships gave rise to the Arab Bureau in 1832. It was no coincidence that the two institutions arose simultaneously and that the personality common to both was a young 24-year-old engineering officer, **Christophe Leon Louis Jucault de Lamoricière**. Young Lamoricière played a central role in both because he was the first French officer to seriously engage the Arabs on their own cultural terms, as well as being an energetic, intelligent, and hardworking soldier who genuinely believed in his “civilizing mission.” He learned Arabic, studied the Koran, met (unarmed) with tribal leaders, and mingled at every opportunity with Arabs in Algiers. He gained a reputation among the Arabs for courage, firmness, and trustworthiness. From his efforts and those of others, two institutions were born that helped the army build solid relationships with the tribes and, eventually, obtain good intelligence.

For Lamoricière, the keys to success were contacts, networks of good relationships, and understanding the local mentalities. Trading brutality for brutality, he believed, had a fundamentally negative effect.

French Initiatives

While fighting in Algeria, the French adapted to the situation structurally, organizationally, and tactically. Some of the initiatives developed included:

- *Zouaves*. Two regiments were formed in 1830, drawn from the Zouaoua tribe of mountain-dwelling Berbers who had been bodyguards for their Turkish governors. They had a reputation for being very tough, courageous warriors as well as extremely loyal and well disciplined. One reputed strength of these units was the solidarity between officers and men. They were integrated into the French command structure and successfully used as shock troops. Zouaves traveled light, lived off the land, and had no permanent garrisons. Their manner of fighting was the model recommended by Lamoricière to GEN Bugeaud when Bugeaud took command of the Army of Africa in 1841. To “fight like a Zouave” became high praise for a French soldier.
- *Arab Bureau*. The Arab Bureau became a multipurpose organization that evolved out of relationships formed with tribal leaders by officers such as Lamoricière, who learned Arabic and won the respect of the local sheiks and caids (Berber feudal rulers). The bureau provided the military with reliable, Arab-speaking interlocutors and an ear for the tribes to express their concerns. The bureau's job was to win over tribes to French rule and, to some degree, be their advocate in dealing with the colonists. Some of the reasons for the Arab Bureau's success were the requirement that all of its officers speak Arabic, the benefit of long years of service within the bureau, regular face-to-face visits with the tribal chiefs and,

- generally, a benevolent if not somewhat paternalistic attitude toward the natives. A measure of the bureau's success was its intense dislike by the colonists.
- *Bugeaud tactics.* As in Iraq, the enemy in Algeria learned early the folly of fighting pitched battles against disciplined infantry and firepower they could never match. The Arabs' strengths were their desert-toughened horses, their extreme mobility, and their effective use of hit-and-run tactics. The army's greatest challenge was finding and engaging an enemy who seemed to be everywhere and whose allies were the sun, the heat, and the desert. Bugeaud retrained his troops to fight like the Arabs. They learned to use animal supply trains, carry less equipment, and to live off the land for as much as 2 months at a time. His strategy was to keep his troops in constant pursuit and punish tribes suspected of aiding the emir. Unlike Iraq, "the insurgency" received little outside aid, save from French deserters who helped train the infantry and who manufactured weapons. Arms were also supplied from Spain and Britain via Moroccan intermediaries. "Victory" ultimately came from France's commitment to a permanent occupation. There was no exit strategy.

Some Assumptions

The fighting in Algeria during the 19th and 20th centuries was never simply Muslims against Christians or French against Arabs. The tribes and religious sects disagreed violently among themselves over matters of war or peace with the occupier. In this regard, Iraq today is little different from Algeria then. Even if the Bugeaud total war approach to victory is not generally applicable, the Zouaves and Arab Bureau offer models worth thinking about. The basis for such an assertion rests on three assumptions:

- *To manage the menace posed by Islamic violence (i.e., reduce to the level of Basque nationalists in Spain), the fight must be born mainly by Muslims.* This occurred in Algeria in the 1990s. A not very popular Muslim establishment defeated an internal Muslim rebellion that nearly toppled the government—a rebellion that has many echoes today in Iraq. One important ingredient in the success of the Algerian Army was the disavowal by the general population of the tactics of the so-called Islamic terrorists—tactics seen as dishonoring Islam and serving no political purpose. Although numerous attacks took place on French soil in 1995, killing hundreds, there were never any visible French boots on the ground in Algeria.
- *The U.S. military presence can itself be a provocation in the eyes of significant segments of the population.* Unlike France in Algeria (pre-1962), the United States is fighting the war against terrorism within the borders of other sovereign nations, as well as at home. The provocation comes from unprofessional or ignorant behavior of individual U.S. soldiers who don't understand the languages and culture, or more generally because of the unpopularity of a government that is supported by the U.S. Government/military. This hostility is likely to be proportionate to the degree America is seen as swatting flies with sledgehammers.
- *Fought the wrong way, the war on terrorism risks creating more new terrorists than we can destroy. In a world with a billion Muslims, turning 0.5 percent of that population, or 5 million, into human cruise missiles is not a good outcome.* U.S.

troops killing Muslims on Muslim soil only provides fuel for the jihadist fires. Unless the United States decides to wage total war and reduce the populations where terrorists are active to abject submission as we did with Germany and Japan after World War II, the war on terrorism requires a discriminating and deft cooperative approach that builds allies and trust among the local populations, as did GEN Lamoricière. The wisdom once ascribed to Bill Gates for explaining his exceptional staying power at the helm of Microsoft might well apply to U.S. efforts to lead the war on terrorism. He learned “that to keep power you have to give up power.”

Suggestions for Further Discussion and Study

Public preoccupation with exit strategies and military casualties works to the disadvantage of fighting terrorism in Islamic countries over the long term. Finding effective, long-term ways to work with Muslim forces that have the advantages of both cultural and specific area knowledge should be a priority topic to investigate, as the danger we are facing is likely to last for generations. It is useful to remember that the British have struggled with the Irish Republican Army since 1916, despite knowing something about the land, the language, and the culture. Is America likely to do better in farflung Muslim countries than the Brits have done in Northern Ireland? Some of the following might be worth considering:

- Brainstorm ideas for adapting a Zouave model to Iraq and elsewhere. Decide whether to study in greater depth the French experience, command structure, sources of strong morale, etc., or similarly, the British experience with Beloch, Pathan, and Gurkha units. Figure out possibilities to apply relevant experience.
- Brainstorm ideas for creating Islamic bureaus in various countries, including the United States, along the model of the French Arab Bureau and how both of the first two assumptions above could be adapted to working with sovereign governments.
- Consider the use of local, elite troops and possibilities of giving them dual citizenship to avoid the unhappy fate of “collaborators,” as the harkis suffered in Algeria after 1962.

Could not an Arab Bureau concept—a selective use and integration of local Muslim troops into the Marine command structure—be combined with the ideas presented in Capt David E. Cooper’s excellent article, “An Organizational Model for Marines Fighting an Insurgency” (*MCG*, Jun05), in which the author argued for the vital importance of cultural knowledge, local perspective, and a Marine Corps role in integrating the many different kinds of resources needed to defeat an insurgency?

Suggested Reading

- Churchill, Charles-Henry, *The Life of Abdelkader, ex sultan of the Arabs*, Chapman Hall, London, 1876.
- Danziger, R., *Abdelkader and the Algerians; Resistance to the French and Internal Consolidation*, Holmes and Meier, New York, 1977.

- **Hirtz, Georges, *Islam—Occident; Paths of Respect, Understanding and Harmony*** (in French) PSR Editions, La Roche-Rigault, 1998. (Profiles of four people who exemplified intercultural understanding in the 19th century: Abdelkader, GEN Lamoricière, Aurelie Picard, and husband Sheik Tidjani. The Lamoricière chapter could be worth getting translated).
- **Kiser, John W., *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria***, St Martins Press, New York, 2001, (especially chapter 20, pp. 264–275 for short portrait of Abdelkader).

Note

1. The Regency of Algiers was the westernmost outpost of the Ottoman Empire, best known for raiding American and European shipping and ransoming its crews.

>*Mr. Kiser is the author of Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria. The book is a true account of a Christian-Muslim oasis of peace that existed in the midst of Muslim violence during the 1990s.*