

Algeria/Afghanistan: The Inescapable Failure of Counterinsurgency

by Jacques Cheminade

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Oct. 18—To understand the fallacy of composition involved, we have to identify its roots. U.S. Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander of the U.S. Central Command (Centcom), wrote the preface to the French translation of the military manual *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger Security International, 1964 and 2006), which he described as “the only really great book on revolutionary war.”

The book, written in 1964 by David Galula, a French lieutenant-colonel who died 40 years ago, was based on his experience in the Algerian war. This book is the main reference for U.S. strategy, as conducted first in Iraq, and now in Afghanistan, according to both Petraeus and Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.

Galula first came to the attention of the U.S. military services in 1962, when he was invited to speak at a RAND Corporation-sponsored seminar. Stephen Hosmer asked him to describe his experience, which was later written up in his first book *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1963 and 2006).

Counterinsurgency became must reading at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and at the center preparing the troops in charge of training Iraqi and Afghani security forces.

Galula, who opposed French President Gen. Charles de Gaulle’s policy in Algeria and vaunted the successful pacification of his Algerian region of Djebel Mimoun, in Great Kabylia, claims that the Algerian War could have been won (see box), “if the policy of France had not changed.” It was just a matter of “getting rid of the hardliners,” he said.

Thus, the entire Anglo-American policy in Afghanistan and Iraq today is based on a great illusion. It is said

among their enemies that “dogs return to their vomit”; it would be politically and militarily absurd to prove them right once again. All the more so, as the position of the allies in Afghanistan is much worse than it was for the French in Algeria.

We intend to refute, point by point, the arguments in Galula’s manual. In fact, any counterinsurgency policy, however logical it might appear, will fail, if it is imposed by outside forces in an international context beyond their control. The lesson, then and now, is that the sooner an occupying army—or an army perceived as such by the “indigenous population”—pulls out, the better, for all the actors in the conflict.

Occupiers Cannot Be Nation-Builders

Galula claims that “the population is the major stake.” Therefore, he recommends a series of formulas for controlling the population, by combining the fight against the insurgents with aid for economic, social, cultural, and health-care development, and with psychological-warfare methods that are inspired—although he doesn’t say so—by Maoism. However, we stress that it is impossible to transform an occupying power into a nation-building force, which is the main reason for the French defeat in Algeria.

It is argued today that deploying more troops in Afghanistan would bring about better results—perhaps not a victory, but at least a “non-defeat.” That is absurd. Some 68,000 U.S. troops are currently deployed there, along with a slightly higher number of contractors (mercenaries); 35,000 European troops; and about 90,000 Afghani forces, many of whom are badly paid and dysfunctional. It seems that the “surge” demanded by General McChrystal would imply some 40,000 additional troops.

But, just consider that, in Algeria, France had 500,000 troops, in addition to the 150,000 locally determined *harki* (Algerian) forces and the numerous passive defense forces established in nearly every village. And, although France did achieve certain military victories, we were never able to defeat the “insurrection.”

In fact, the more military advances France made, the more a political defeat became manifest, just as multiplying the angles of a polygon brings one closer to the circumference of the circle while proving at the same time the incommensurability of the circle with the polygon. Galula, an excellent Cartesian, made the same error in politics as Archimedes did in geometry: He believed it possible to square the circle!

Even more in Afghanistan than in Algeria, the credibility of those collaborating with the occupier is close to zero. You can't create, from the outside, an administration and local power structures which the population trusts in the long run. The electoral fraud of the Karzai government, the implication of his relatives in the drug traffic, his incapacity to prevent terrorist attacks, even in Kabul, have discredited him.

Moreover, although anti-terrorist aerial bombings by drones can eliminate dangerous enemies, they also kill the civilians in their midst. Every enemy soldier killed stirs the hatred of dozens or hundreds of hostile elements.

In Algeria, Galula thought that foreign influence could be reduced to nearly zero by gridding the territory



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French President Charles de Gaulle in Algiers, 1958. Initially opposed to independence for Algeria, de Gaulle changed his mind, invoking the wrath of the "counterinsurgents." Algeria gained its independence in 1962.

and closing the borders with Tunisia and Morocco. That was an illusion. The insurrection's reserve army was located on the borders, in Tunisia and Morocco. Moreover, gridding meant displacing populations into rural

The Military Illusion

From David Galula, Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice (2008 edition), pp.68-69. Part of the first paragraph has been back-translated from the 2006 French edition.

In Algeria, where the French, as of 1956, enjoyed an overwhelming military superiority over the FLN, their efforts were spread initially all over the territory, with forces concentrated along the borders with Tunisia and Morocco and in Kabilia, a rocky and highly populated region. The FLN forces were quickly smashed, but the absence of doctrine and experience on the part of those conducting the military operations, among other things, precluded a clear-cut French success.

In 1959-60, the French strategy proceeded from West to East, starting with the Oran region, then to the Ouarsenis Mountains, to Kabilia, and finally, to the Constantine region. This time, there was enough experience; the period of muddling through was over.

By the end of 1960, when the French Government policy had switched from "defeating the insurgency" to "disengaging France from Algeria," the FLN forces in Algeria were reduced to between 8,000 and 9,000 men well isolated from the population, broken into tiny, ineffective bands, with 6,500 weapons, most of which had been buried for lack of ammunition; not a single wilaya (region) boss in Algeria was in contact with the FLN organization abroad, not even by radio; purges were devastating their ranks, and some of the high-ranking FLN chiefs in Algeria made overtures to surrender. The borders were closed to infiltration, except very occasionally by one or two men. The French forces included 150,000 Moslems, not counting self-defense groups in almost every village. All that would have remained to do, if the policy had not changed, was to eliminate the diehard insurgent remnants, a long task at best, considering the size of Algeria and its terrain. In Malaya, this final phase of the counterinsurgency lasted at least five years.

However, the French forces never won. Faced with perpetual war, they granted Algeria its independence in 1962.