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The Algerian Revolution's Armament Activities in Libya in 1955: A Study Based on French Archival Sources

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Absract:

This study aims to provide an overview of the organization of the Algerian Revolution and to examine its activities in Libya in the field of armament during 1955, based on French archival sources. These archives provide detailed reports that offer new insights into the activities of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Libya, particularly as they provide information on a critical period in the early stages of the Revolution. During this period, Ahmed Ben Bella played a leading role in organizing the procurement and transfer of arms to Algeria, while also establishing a revolutionary network within Libyan territory. This network was involved in procuring arms and clothing, as well as disseminating the ideas and objectives of the Algerian Revolution.

I chose "French archival sources" rather than "French archives" here because it is the more natural academic formulation when referring to archival documents used as evidence. French archival catalogues also document materials concerning Libyan assistance to the FLN and the presence of FLN elements in Libya.

Keywords: Algerian Revolution; Libya; Ahmed Ben Bella, Armament; 1955.

Introduction

The leadership of the Algerian Revolution attached great importance to organization, considering it a fundamental and effective component of the revolutionary movement. In Libya, this organization was highly structured under the effective leadership of Ahmed Ben Bella, who worked to procure arms and transfer them into Algeria. The strength of the National Liberation Front's (FLN) revolutionary organization in Libya enabled it to evade surveillance by French intelligence.

The activities of the FLN in Libya included maintaining communication between the revolutionary leadership in Algeria and the committee in Cairo; procuring arms and ammunition; manufacturing clothing and military equipment; and organizing the transportation of mujahideen to Egypt and Iraq for training, followed by their return to Algeria. Under Ben Bella's leadership, the Algerian revolutionary leadership also ensured the organization of sessions devoted to political education and military theory.

What did the activities of the Algerian Revolution in Libya during 1955 consist of?

1. The Leadership Committee of the Algerian Revolution in

Libya: The head of the organization was Ahmed Ben Bella, who was also a member of the External Leadership Committee in Cairo. He divided his time between Cairo, Tripoli, and Morocco. In Tripoli, he had a staff headquarters that served as an advanced command center for the External Leadership Committee in Cairoⁱ. He was assisted by:

- Bachir Kadi, head of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Tripoli.
- Chebata Saïd Turki, a former student at the Military Academy in Iraq.
- Ali, known as Mohamed, originally from Annaba, a former student in Paris, and Masra's officer in charge.ⁱⁱ

The strength of the revolutionary organization of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Libya enabled it to evade surveillance by French intelligence services. According to French reports, French intelligence was described as frequently being too delayed to be exploited in a timely manner. Furthermore, all information reaching the C.R.O.D. Centre for immediate exploitation did not reach the General Headquarters of the Forces in Tunisia / 2nd Division (E.M.T.A./2ème Division), thereby preventing it from monitoring such information and ensuring coordination among the relevant departments when necessary.

The numerous and varied French reportsⁱⁱⁱ concerning the activities of the Algerian Revolution in Libya and the organizations of the National Liberation Front (FLN) confirm intensive political activity and weapons collection carried out under the watch of the Libyan government and police, without any interference from them.

The Algerian Revolution had numerous premises used as meeting places, accommodation facilities, and weapons depots. These included the former headquarters of the Neo-Destour Party, located at 17 Rue El-Rachid, where the Tunisians occupied only one room; the Jilani Hotel in the Old City; the house of Mohamed Beyoud, a tailor, at 46 Rue El-Turk; a villa in Gargares, located 4 km from Tripoli; and a Libyan house in the Old City at 98 Rue El-Roumi. In addition, during their stays in Tripoli, the rebel leaders stayed at one of the following hotels: the Central Hotel, the Excelsior Hotel, or the Victoria Hotel.

a) In Cyrenaica: Marsa Hilal, a port located east of Benghazi; the house of Salah Touati, or Biskri, an Algerian who owned a large carpentry workshop in Benghazi.

b) In Tripolitania: Castel-Hantio, located 20 km south of Tripoli; the Al-Masra Camp, Souq Al-Sabt; the former German Consulate building, where 60 Algerians^{iv} were accommodated. Gharyan, located 80 km south of Tripoli, was an experimental agricultural station. Zanzur, 20 km west of Tripoli, was a former Tunisian camp that had since come under Algerian administration and housed 32 Algerians. Sidi Serri, 4 km from Tripoli, was the residence of Bachir Kadi. Jamil, located 10 km south of Zuwara, was the residence of the Tunisian Mabrouk Al-Zenati. Rigdalen, 10 km west of Zuwara, was the residence of Mabrouk Al-Wardani, a former faris (cavalryman) at the Ben Gardane depot. Halut belonged to Sheikh Issa Ben Slimane, known as Issaoui Nalouti. Jouh (west of Nalut) was another property belonging to Issaoui Nalouti, where 10 Algerians were staying while awaiting passage to Algeria.^v

2. Activities:

The activities of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Libya included maintaining communication between the leadership of the revolution in Algeria and the Committee in Cairo, procuring weapons and ammunition, and manufacturing clothing and military equipment^{vi}. A number of small-scale tailors in the Old City of Tripoli received orders to make khaki uniforms, consisting of a jacket and trousers. An order for 500 uniforms was placed in October 1955, while a stock of 300 uniforms was stored at the headquarters of the Neo-Destour Party.^{vii}

The Algerians also resorted to transporting them through the import-export company "Mohamed Bounawi and Saad Ali Cherif," located at 2 Al-Bayda Street, Tripoli. They also had access to the following vehicles: a Jeep provided by Salah Touati, known as Boukri, the carpenter from Benghazi; and a small Austin truck.^{viii}

A French report indicates that the clandestine convoys identified were carrying only a very limited number of weapons, most of which were recovered weapons. These routes made use of the usual smuggling routes. However, various indications, particularly information gathered during the Timimoun operation in the Nememcha region, confirmed the existence of genuine smuggling networks. It is therefore likely that these weapons originated in Egypt and passed through Libya and southern Tunisia. It is believed that large quantities of weapons were transported to Algeria by teams of Algerian specialists who operated for political motives rather than for the profit that could be derived from such operations.^{ix} Algerian regions sent emissaries to Tripoli to receive instructions and collect weapons. For this purpose, Ben Bella entrusted the Libyan Boubaker Mohamed Belkheir with conveying instructions and funds to Algeria. Through this arrangement, he hoped to establish more effective lines of communication than those available to Algerians who were forced to cross the border clandestinely. Documents were sent from Tripoli to Cairo through the Egyptian Embassy in Libya. On the other hand, the organization was responsible for transporting the mujahideen who travelled to Egypt and Iraq for training, as well as those returning from these countries, while ensuring that individuals did not remain for long periods in the same place in Libya^x.

[The weapons were transported] by two Libyan intermediaries. They usually arrived by sea at Marsa Hilal, where they were received by the carpenter Salah Touati. They were then transported by truck to Tripoli or to one of the headquarters in the interior regions. Weapons were purchased locally by professional smugglers, including Miftah al-Farhī, who lived in Bab Ben Ghashir, Tripoli, and Mohamed al-Fanjani, from the Kandana tribe of Sirte.^{xi}

The prices were estimated at approximately 5,000 francs per rifle, and the source of these weapons appeared to be, in most cases, illicit trade conducted by British and American soldiers from the camps of Sabratha and Surman.

The weapons were stored either in Jamil, at the residence of Mabrouk al-Zenati, or at the Al-Masra Camp, in two rooms on the first floor. They were then transported in small quantities towards Algeria using convoys consisting of two or three camels or two mules^{xii}, Eighty percent of the smuggling was destined for Algeria, but it necessarily passed through southern Tunisia.^{xiii}

Two main routes were used for transporting weapons:

The northern route: Jamil – south of Ben Gardane – Beni

Khedache–Toujane – Jebel Kashem al-Rabīl – Jebel Ouicha.

The southern route: Nalut – Dheiba, then either Kebili or the Wadi Souf region.¹⁴

Recent information indicated that a large convoy, carrying 7 tons of weapons and ammunition, was transported at the end of November 1955 through the Fezzan region, towards the Lajras mountain range. It appears that at least part of the funds required to purchase these weapons originated in Algeria, as Ben Bella sent emissaries to the leaders of the armed groups to collect funds from officials of the revolution.^{xiv}

Until recently, the Algerian emissaries had sought only to use the existing smuggling networks. They were probably in the process of establishing their own networks at that time. Covert maritime smuggling was possible under the cover of coastal fishing activities.

3. The Libyan Position:

The Libyan government allowed weapons to pass through its territory towards Algeria, but it intercepted weapons destined for Tunisia on two occasions. While acknowledging a degree of commitment on the part of Mr. Ben Halim to implementing the Treaty of Friendship with France, this position clearly reflects a concern for internal security. It is likely that not all police officers complied with the government's instructions and that some of them turned a blind eye to the smuggling of weapons.

The smugglers were Egyptian traders motivated by financial interests rather than ideological considerations, and they certainly took precautions to ensure protection, which was perhaps limited in number but nevertheless influential and effective. It is still too early to determine whether the Algerians who had recently entered this network enjoyed the same level of protection.^{xv}

The Libyan police occasionally intervened in the activities of the Maghrebi rebels. They were aware of their organization but generally turned a blind eye to their activities and, in many cases, provided them with protection. The police were slow to intervene despite a request from the French representative, who had informed them of the presence of a convoy heading towards Al-Ajras.¹⁷

4. France's Response to Arms Smuggling

a) By Land: The issue had already been examined by the S.D.E.C.E. (External Documentation and Counter-Espionage Service), which was working to identify possible solutions^{xvi}. The Service reported that the matter would be examined by its head in Libya. At the highest command level, consideration could be given to providing the relevant agencies with additional resources, both financial and human, in order to establish an adequate and extensive network, since a chain of intermediaries was considered essential. Such a system could only disrupt the Algerian leadership's efforts to monopolize arms smuggling for its own benefit.^{xvii}

Influence over Police Officers: Here too, the means available to exert influence over the entire Libyan police force were insufficient. However, a few contacts, even if limited in number, could prove effective given the solidarity among police officers. Through these contacts, the best intelligence could be obtained.^{xviii}

Diplomatic Representation: This could be achieved through repeated diplomatic interventions with the Libyan authorities in order to create a certain "climate." However, such interventions could only be based on accurate and verified facts. These interventions should be prepared in Tripoli through coordination between the military attaché and the head of the External Documentation and Counter-Espionage Service (S.D.E.C.E.) station. The French Command in Africa (E.T.F.A.) would then determine whether it was appropriate to involve the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the matter and request a formal diplomatic representation.^{xix}

This involved land surveillance, as peace in Algeria was closely linked to controlling the Libyan–Tunisian border, since the fundamental problem for the Algerian mujahideen remained the supply of weapons. An intensive military effort along several hundred kilometres of the front could provide an effective barrier. Effective surveillance was to be organized in the north-east, from Dheiba to the coast. In the south-west, however, the surveillance of a vast area extending 250 km in width and 300 km in depth was ensured only by three units of Saharan Meharist cavalry, operating from Fort Saint and Bordj el-Bouf, together with a motorized platoon whose operations covered the area from Dheiba to Jenin.^{xx}

The land-surveillance system to be implemented should extend in depth along the border. Permanent posts should be established, with their commanders maintaining contact with the local population^{xxi} and the nearest Libyan authorities. The garrisons stationed at these posts should not remain static; rather, they should make frequent sorties and "move about" in order to familiarize themselves with the area and maintain close contact with its inhabitants. Mobile units capable of moving faster than the elements they were tasked with intercepting should also be deployed.

A network of well-maintained desert roads. Previous experience has demonstrated that the system should not be limited to motor vehicles, but should also include Meharist units (Saharan camel-mounted cavalry).^{xxii}

As for the Command of the Saharan Land Forces (C.S.T.T.), the construction of bordjs (fortified posts) by the Military Engineering Service is currently underway. The following additional resources have been allocated to the mobile units: a

group comprising four mechanized Saharan platoons stationed at Bordj el-Bouf; four mobile support platoons, each averaging 60 personnel, assigned to guard the bordjs; and a Saharan military engineering company stationed at Ksar Rahilan.^{xxiii}

This reinforcement plan may be criticized for failing to take into account the urgent need to double the number of Meharist companies, as they are the only units capable of pursuing rebels in desert areas inaccessible to vehicles, particularly in wadis and mountainous terrain. Surveillance should be strengthened through closer cooperation between the Saharan forces in Tunisia and Algeria.²⁶

b) Air Surveillance: The ground-based measures should be supplemented by reconnaissance aircraft and helicopters. Strict control should be imposed over the flight of foreign aircraft above the French zone in North Africa (A.F.N.). Any unauthorized flight should be reported immediately by the territory concerned. Aircraft landing without prior notification should not be permitted to take off again. The installation of a radar network has proven necessary in order to determine the locations of aircraft. A system of listening stations should also be established to enable the detection of clandestine radio transmitters.^{xxiv}

c) Maritime Surveillance: Maritime surveillance is not easy as long as a state of emergency has not been declared, and the current political circumstances in Tunisia do not permit such a measure to be taken. The large number of fishing boats facilitates smuggling operations. Moreover, control over Tunisian ports remains weak due to the shortage of customs officers and the difficulties posed by shipping companies.^{xxv}

d) Intelligence Surveillance: The various intelligence services in Tunisia cooperate closely with the C.S.T.T., which has dispatched Second Bureau officers to the south on missions to investigate the scale of clandestine smuggling. However, the main concern at the local level is the breakdown in relations between the Administrative Intelligence officers (A.I.) and the local population. The makhzen personnel, who had previously provided information, have been separated from the French authorities for reasons related to political expediency, as these authorities are perceived to be on their way out.^{xxvi}

Conclusion:

Although the revolutionary organization led by Ben Bella in Libya was relatively modest in scale, it appears to have been effective. With Libyan support, it was capable of collecting and directing large quantities of weapons, ammunition, and explosives towards Algeria. The Libyan government worked to protect the revolutionary organization of the National Liberation Front (FLN) on its territory. Despite repeated French diplomatic interventions with the Libyan government, these efforts did not result in the expulsion of the Algerians.

The issue of armament was one of the most important pillars of the Algerian Revolution and constituted its backbone. Consequently, it was a major concern for the leaders of the Revolution, who attached great importance to it.

ⁱ SHAT, 1H, 1539, Organisations et activités des rebelles nord-africains en Libye, Renseignements connus à la date du 20.12.1955, p. 1.

ⁱⁱ SHAT, 1H, 1539, Organisations et activités des rebelles nord-africains en Libye, Renseignements connus à la date du 20.12.1955, p. 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ SHAT, 1H, 1539, Organisations et activités des rebelles nord-africains en Libye, Renseignements connus à la date du 20.12.1955, p. 1.

^{iv} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Organisations et activités des rebelles nord-africains en Libye, Renseignements connus à la date du 20.12.1955, p. 2.

^v SHAT, 1H, 1539, Organisations et activités des rebelles nord-africains en Libye, Renseignements connus à la date du 20.12.1955, p. 3.

^{vi} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Inspection des forces terrestres, maritimes et aériennes d'Afrique du Nord, Paris, 27 Dec. 1955.

^{vii} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Inspection des forces terrestres, maritimes et aériennes d'Afrique du Nord, Paris, 27 Dec. 1955.

^{viii} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Inspection des forces terrestres, maritimes et aériennes d'Afrique du Nord, Paris, 27 Dec. 1955.

^{ix} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Organisation, physionomie et trafic en Libye, 25 November 1955.

^x SHAT, 1H, 1539, Inspection des forces terrestres, maritimes et aériennes d'Afrique du Nord, Paris, 27 December 1955.

^{xi} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Trafic d'armes des rebelles algériens en Tripoli, Renseignements connus à la date du 20.12.1955, p. 4.

^{xii} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Trafic d'armes des rebelles algériens en Tripoli, Renseignements connus à la date du 20.12.1955, p. 4.

^{xiii} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic d'armes, attitude du Gouvernement libyen, 25 November 1955. ¹⁴ SHAT, 1H, 1539, Trafic d'armes des rebelles algériens en Tripoli, Renseignements connus à la date du 20.12.1955, p. 4.

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- ^{xiv} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Trafic d'armes des rebelles algériens en Tripoli, Renseignements connus à la date du 20.12.1955, p. 4.
- ^{xv} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic d'armes, attitude du Gouvernement libyen, 25 November 1955. ¹⁷ SHAT, 1H, 1539, Inspection des forces terrestres, maritimes et aériennes d'Afrique du Nord, Paris, 27 December 1955.
- ^{xvi} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic d'armes, attitude du Gouvernement libyen, 25 November 1955.
- ^{xvii} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Inspection des forces terrestres, maritimes et aériennes d'Afrique du Nord, Paris, 27 December 1955.
- ^{xviii} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic d'armes, répression du trafic en Libye, 25 November 1955.
- ^{xix} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic d'armes, répression du trafic en Libye, 25 November 1955.
- ^{xx} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic terrestre, 25 November 1955.
- ^{xxi} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic d'armes, répression à la frontière et en Tunisie, surveillance terrestre, 25 November 1955.
- ^{xxii} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic d'armes, répression à la frontière et en Tunisie, surveillance terrestre, 25 November 1955.
- ^{xxiii} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic d'armes, répression à la frontière et en Tunisie, surveillance terrestre, 25 November 1955. ²⁶ SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic terrestre, 25 November 1955.
- ^{xxiv} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic d'armes, répression à la frontière et en Tunisie, surveillance aérienne, 25 November 1955.
- ^{xxv} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic d'armes, répression à la frontière et en Tunisie, surveillance maritime, 25 November 1955.
- ^{xxvi} SHAT, 1H, 1539, Relative au trafic du renseignement, 25 November 1955.