

Arms Convoys and Border Crossings on the Algerian- Moroccan Frontier 1954-1962

-A Study of Infiltration and Confrontation Strategies-

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Abstract:

This study examines one of the most critical and subtle issues faced by the Algerian War of Liberation between 1954 and 1962: the problem of arms convoys crossing the western Algerian borders to support the armed struggle against French colonialism. These convoys represented the lifeline of the liberation revolution and were given significant attention by the National Liberation Army (ALN).

The arms convoys and border crossings encountered severe and complex challenges, primarily in how to penetrate electrified and barbed-wire barriers, avoid landmines, and bypass surveillance towers—particularly from 1957 onward, when crossing the western border became akin to a journey into hell.

Despite all these dangers, the ALN succeeded in breaching the borders and ensuring passage, thanks to the continuous development of its methods and techniques for infiltration. It also adapted its organizational and military tactics, which proved successful on numerous occasions.

Keywords: the Algerian- Moroccan Frontier; Arms Convoys and Border, the National Liberation Army; the Algerian War of Liberation; 1954-1962.

1. Introduction

The Algerian War of Liberation (1954–1962) is recognized as one of the greatest revolutions of the twentieth century, distinguished by its well-organized structure and the continuity of resistance despite the imbalance of power in favor of French colonialism. Arming the National Liberation Army (ALN) was among the greatest challenges faced by the revolutionary leadership, particularly under the military blockade imposed on the Algerian territory and France's efforts to isolate the armed struggle from external support.

Warfare strategies are generally based on two main approaches: defensive and offensive. From the very beginning of the revolution on November 1st, 1954, France sought to implement physical barriers to isolate the revolution from the outside. In this context, France quickly focused on the western border strip, accelerating the construction of an electrified barbed-wire barrier. Following extensive studies, proposals, and boundary mapping, French military engineering units rapidly undertook the task of building these fortifications.

It was not long after France executed its defensive strategy—establishing heavily fortified lines such as the Morice Line and the Challe Line—that the issue of arms convoys and border crossings between Algeria and Morocco emerged as one of the most critical crises confronting the revolution. These convoys served as the lifeline supplying the mujahideen with weapons, ammunition, and provisions, making them a constant target for the French army, which sought to intercept and dismantle them.

Studying this issue offers a deeper understanding of the resilience mechanisms employed by the revolution and highlights the organizational and logistical efforts led by the ALN, particularly the creation of specialized military engineering units in response to the border situation.

This research aims to shed light on the effectiveness of arms convoys crossing the western border and to examine the primary methods and techniques used by the revolution to secure them. It

presents the innovative solutions that proved effective in the field, despite intense surveillance and the constant movement of French forces seeking to isolate the revolution from external support. Accordingly, the following research question is posed:

How were the soldiers of the Algerian National Liberation Army (ALN) able to overcome the military and technical obstacles imposed by the electrified barbed-wire barriers? And what strategies and methods did they use to penetrate the western borders during the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962)?

2. Military Surveillance Posts on the Western Border (1954–1957):

Monitoring the Algerian-Moroccan border from the Mediterranean coast in the north to Sidi Issa in the south, covering approximately 100 km in a straight line. The surveillance consisted of: (FR-CAOM-GGA, 1955)

Table 1. Advanced Posts along the Western Border:

Zone	Military Presence	Location	Date
01	One unit from C.R.S. (Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité)	Port-Say (now Marsa Ben M'Hidi)	/
02	Unit from the 10/4 Legion of the French Gendarmerie	On the border	April 27, 1955
03	Unit from the 8/9 Legion of the French Gendarmerie	Bab El Assa School	June 16, 1955
04	Military unit from the C.R.S.	Perret Farm, Sidi Boujnan	/
05	Military unit from the C.R.S.	Ravel Farm	/
06	Military unit from the 8/9 Legion of the French Gendarmerie	Ras Jebel El Asfour	December 5, 1954
07	Military unit from the 8/9 Legion of the French Gendarmerie	Sidi Abdallah School	May 4, 1955

Table 2. Advanced Posts along the Western Border:

Location	Military Presence
Es-Sebbâbna	French Gendarmerie
Tounane	Unit from C.R.S. (161)
Nedroma	Unit from C.R.S. (161)
Bouhlou	C.R.S. (183)
Sidi M'jahid	French Gendarmerie (Unit 34)
Beni Bahdel	Battalion from the 6th Legion
Sidi Djilali	Horse-mounted unit from the 10 th Legion

Table 3. Reserve Units:

Location	Military Unit
Tlemcen City	11 units from the 10/4 Legion of the French Gendarmerie

3 . The Establishment of the Morice Line on the Western Border in 1957:

World War I was characterized, from an organizational standpoint, by the use of barbed wire barriers on the battlefield. This terrifying barbed wire, invented by the American Joseph Glidden in 1873, was previously used by the Italians in Libya to isolate it from Egypt—from Bardiyah to El-Ghebad—over a stretch of approximately 250 km in the desert. However, with the advancement of infiltration techniques, such plans have proven ineffective in protecting international borders in modern times. As a result, alternative solutions had to be considered, such as concrete walls, like the one erected by the Israeli occupation forces to isolate the occupied territories from the Gaza Strip, or the United States' project to construct a concrete

barrier along its border with Mexico to control illegal immigration. (Bali, 2013, p. 6)

Following this logic, the French government in Algeria between 1954 and 1962 took inspiration from the famous Maginot Line and implemented electrified and mined barriers along Algeria's eastern and western borders. The project was initially proposed by Defense Minister André Morice (Challe, 1968, pp. 6-50) and was later realized on the ground under the names "Morice Line" and "Challe Line". (Kouati, 2009, p. 106)

The idea to construct a barbed-wire barrier along Algeria's western border originated with General Raymond Pedron, the military commander of the Oran sector. The plan was realized by General Henri Lorillot in early June 1956, with the aim of restricting the movement of freedom fighters (mujahideen) into Morocco and isolating the Algerian revolution from its rear bases. General Paul Vanuxem (Vanuxem, 1964, pp. 7-30) later proposed connecting the barrier to high-voltage electricity, but the project was ultimately attributed to André Morice (Bali, Recorded testimony of veteran, 2017) and named after him. It became known by various names, such as the "Line of Death," the "Maginot of Algeria," and the "Great Serpent."

Regarding the purpose of establishing the Morice and Challe lines, Charles de Gaulle wrote in his memoirs: "...Barriers were established along the borders of Algeria with Tunisia and Morocco... Thanks to these measures—mines, observation posts, and barbed-wire fences—the insurgent forces would no longer be able to enter Algeria before peace negotiations could take place...". (Gaulle, 1971, pp. 59-60)

Similarly, General Raoul Salan emphasized the necessity of sealing the borders against the National Liberation Army as the most effective means to suffocate the revolution and put an end to the smuggling of weapons and fighters from Morocco. This became increasingly important as military operations grew in Wilaya V (the Fifth Military Zone) during 1954 and 1955, especially given the volume of weapons being transported through Wilaya V toward other areas, notably Wilaya IV.

As a result, General Salan was particularly concerned with enhancing these barriers using minefields, radars, and electrified wires. He believed it was unwise to focus solely on the eastern border while neglecting the western front.

The electrified barbed-wire barrier stretched 700 kilometers along the western border from Port Say (currently Marsa Ben M'Hidi) to Igli, near Béchar (formerly Colomb-Béchar). It was divided into two main sections:

Section One: Extended from Port Say to Bouihi, along the Algerian-Moroccan border.

Section Two: Extended from Bouihi southward to the Igli area near Béchar. Due to the difficult terrain in this region, the barrier often deviated one kilometer or more away from the actual Moroccan border. When it reached the Mechria area, it followed the railway line. (Bali, Recorded testimony of veteran, 2017)

To understand the serious danger these barriers constituted to freedom fighters during the revolution—and even after independence—it is essential to recognize the components of the Morice Line on the western border:

First Component: A protective and alarm line.

Second Component: A six-meter-wide minefield immediately following the alarm line.

Third Component: An electrified fence consisting of eight live wires.

Fourth Component: A secure technical corridor used by colonial forces for fence maintenance and repair.

Fifth Component: A second electrified fence running parallel to the first.

Sixth Component: Another protective and alarm line similar to the first.

Seventh Component: An open terrain zone free of trees and slopes, designated for maneuvering and ensuring a clear, continuous surveillance field. (Kendel, 2006, pp. 51-53)

In addition to that, the occupation forces established numerous centers and watchtowers in areas near the barbed and electrified fences. I will attempt to mention the names of some of them and their respective functions, taking as an example the second zone of Wilaya V, as follows: (Abdelkader, 2015) (Chemlal, 2015)

Table 4. Surveillance Centers and Intervention Tasks

Zone	Surveillance Centers and Intervention Tasks
Port-Say	Naval intervention base for operations in border-adjacent areas
Chaïb Rasso	Center equipped with heavy artillery batteries
Bab El Assa	Designated for surveillance and equipped with artillery
Lehbab and Essabbana	Equipped with radar and artillery batteries
Ahmed Bel Djilali	Surveillance center with rapid intervention tasks
El Manaseb	Surveillance center containing artillery
El Gharbi	Equipped with batteries and long-range artillery
Ech-Chaïbiquia	Main coordination base between centers in the zone, equipped with heavy artillery, radar, and electronic surveillance devices

The electrified fences alone were not sufficient to eliminate the Algerian Revolution and isolate it from the outside world. Nevertheless, the land borders were reinforced with watchtowers and guard posts, in addition to the establishment of restricted zones near the Algerian-Moroccan border. All of this, for André Morice, was enough to completely extinguish the revolution in the western region. (Cherif, 1957)

4. The National Liberation Army's Strategy for Breaching the Fences:

Some experts conducted field investigation of the electrified barbed-wire line, studying its dimensions and components such as mines, electric currents, guards, alarm systems, and other defensive installations. Egyptian intelligence officer Fathi Al-Dib provided the revolution leaders with plans to destroy these electrified barriers, which included the following strategies:

- Operations were to be carried out on dark nights, avoiding rainy nights to prevent risks associated with electric currents.

- Intensive and specialized training was to be given to the mujahideen assigned to destroy the electrified line.
- The use of diversionary and deceptive attacks, along with the readiness of support and backup units to confront any sudden enemy reaction.
- Strict secrecy and adherence to the commands of the operation leader were essential to ensure the safety of the plan and protect all personnel during the operation.
- The success of the plan depended on completing the operation within approximately one hour. (Al-Dib, 1984, p. 396)

Despite all the dangers posed by the Morice Line, it ultimately did not achieve its intended effectiveness—even by the French army’s own admission. It was met with the determination and faith of the mujahideen, who coordinated their efforts to devise a plan to clear the mines and destroy the electrified barbed wires. (Boullaras, 1994, p. 23)

The mujahid Miloud Ben Seifi, (Saifi, 2007) a specialist in mine clearance (*démineur*) who had received his training at the “Berkane” center in eastern Morocco, stated that the process of demining relied on using a bayonet (*baïonnette*), carefully striking the ground, and if a mine was detected, its detonator would be removed, rendering it inactive before discarding it. These explosive mines were anti-personnel; they would sever limbs but did not usually kill unless they struck the chest, as they contained no metal fragments. (Saifi, 2007)

Mujahid Bouriche Ammar explained the mine-lifting method, saying that upon reaching the electrified wire, the deminer would encounter around 200 metal fragments. One mine could have four detonators, making it anti-personnel for groups. The process involved cutting the wire and disabling the four detonators. Once a mine had its detonator removed, it would be marked with white cotton, white grease, or another visible white item, so that other mujahideen crossing the electrified fence would recognize and avoid it. (Ammar, 2007)

A specific target was designated for cutting the electrified wire, whether the troops were entering or exiting Algerian territory. The Bangalore (Encyclopedia, 2003, pp. 205-206) torpedo was used to create a gap in the fence, Measuring about 4 meters in length, it was filled with

gunpowder and equipped with a fuse. Once placed and ignited, the soldiers would retreat before it exploded and opened a passage. (Encyclopedia, 2003)

The battalions reportedly breached the fence around five times in 1960. Mujahideen were trained for wire-cutting operations at the “Zegangan” and “Berkane” centers. (Jaloul, 2008)

In the testimony of Mohamed Ben Taleb, known as “Ben Moussa” — one of the veteran mujahideen and a war-disabled fighter who lost a leg in a minefield — he reported his experience in the Morice Line. He stated:

“That line represented a major challenge for the mujahideen during the liberation war.” (Quotidien-d’Oran, 2003)

Ben Moussa joined the ranks of the National Liberation Army in 1957, where he underwent a three-month mine-clearing training at rear bases. He was later assigned to the 8th zone of the 5th Wilaya near Beni Smir in the Jenin Bourezg municipality, about 200 km north of Béchar. He explained that to secure the passage of mujahideen across the line, one had to choose an area with dense trees to allow cover from passing armored vehicles. The deminers would clear the path using a knife blade to detect mines—usually during the night.

He also described different types of mines, including those designed to explode at a height of 80 cm above the ground, releasing lethal shrapnel over a wide area. He said:

“I used a large cutter to cut barbed wire and pliers to deal with mine wires. I never created a straight path; instead, I cleared a zigzag path to avoid detection.”

He added that the electrified wire behind the first barbed-wire line wasn’t usually cut. Instead:

“We dug a passage underneath and then refilled it immediately after use to avoid detection. After opening the corridor and removing mines, I would return to the starting point to widen the path, enabling the safe passage of equipment. I would walk ahead to show the way and stay with the group for a day or two while waiting for the next crossing.” . (Quotidien-d’Oran, 2003)

As for the methods of crossing, Mohamed Mustapha Taleb, explained that specific individuals were selected based on experience, intelligence, physical fitness, and stamina. Initially, the wires were cut using insulated clippers, accompanied by mine-clearers and others specializing in transporting weapons. (Taleb, 2007).

Several other methods were used:

Digging tunnels beneath the wire and then refilling them to hide any signs of crossing.

Using ladders, although this method failed.

Using bent sticks to pull the wires apart and pass through the middle.

From 1959 to 1961, the most commonly used method was the Bangalore Torpedo—a long tube filled with TNT used to detonate mines and electrified wires. (Bali, Recorded testimony of veteran, 2017) Additionally, wooden boxes resembling coffins were used to allow mujahideen to cross to the other side. These boxes were insulated against electricity, easy to assemble and disassemble, and were referred to by the fighters as “rockets.” (Taleb, 2007)

Mujahid Djilali Hadoui (Hadawi, 2007) mentioned other techniques as well. Fighters used large cutters insulated for up to 2,500 volts, plastic chairs to stand on while cutting electrified wires, and tables insulated for 3,600 volts, along with heavy-duty clippers rated for 3,500 volts to suppress electric sparks. A widely adopted tactic involved connecting a cable to both sides of the electrified fence, allowing the current to continue flowing even after the wire was cut in the middle. This cable was tied to a rope; once the fighters had crossed, they would pull the cable away, destroying the fence and its supporting mines. (Hadawi, 2007)

In 1959–1960, children's toys designed to resemble driverless military vehicles were introduced. Among them was a tracked tractor, which the National Liberation Army used along the border to destroy and sabotage the electrified line during infiltration and withdrawal operations. German experts were brought in to help operate this tractor remotely without a driver. It was deployed along the western border, but enemy forces eventually detected and destroyed it. (Abbas, 1991, pp. 172-173)

Mujahideen attempting to breach the electrified barriers often relied on local guides who knew the region well. These were residents familiar with the terrain and the locations of enemy forces, such as guard towers and troop positions. (Beytam, 2000, p. 52)

5 . Major Breach Operations (Weapons and Infiltration) – 1957 to 1962:

One example of mujahideen crossing those deadly electrified barriers is recounted by Ahmed Ben Saadoun, who described events that unfolded along the southwestern border in February 1959. After a clash in the Manasib area, east of Beni Ounif, and the concentration of units near Bou Semghoun, Ben Saadoun received a radio transmission from Colonel Lotfi, assigning him the task of securing the crossing of Commander Othmane and his wife Mimouna into Morocco, as they were coming from eastern Algeria. Ben Saadoun considered this mission extremely delicate and complex.

Othmane and his wife reached the electrified barrier three days later, around 10 PM, at a location between Meghrrar and Jenin Bourezg. The site had already been secured by scouts deployed by Ben Saadoun. During the operation, the demining team successfully disarmed 14 anti-personnel mines and two anti-group mines. Ben Saadoun personally defused one of the mines and gave it to Mimouna as a keepsake, (Bensaadoun, 2006, pp. 76-77) symbolizing the danger she had faced while crossing. Thanks to the cover of darkness, the group managed to cross safely to the other side and reached Sector A of the 8th Zone of the Sahara by early morning, a few kilometers from Tendirara inside Moroccan territory. (Bensaadoun, 2006, pp. 77-78)

Despite all these dangers and difficulties, the battalions continued to cross with weapons and military supplies to support the interior regions. For example, in 1961, according to reports from the Northern War Operations Region and the General Staff, the battalions crossed Mount Asfour as follows:

March 3, 1961: A battalion of 79 mujahideen crossed Mount Asfour toward the Fifth Region in Sidi Bel Abbas.

March 4, 1961: 41 mujahideen crossed via Sidi Lakhdar in the Eighth Zone.

April 3, 1961: 68 mujahideen forcefully crossed Mount Asfour toward the Fifth Wilaya.

April 24, 1961: 77 mujahideen passed through Mount Asfour on their way to Sidi Bel Abbès.

May 29, 1961: 58 mujahideen crossed Mount Asfour by force, heading to the Fourth Region.

Mujahid Mohamed Kantari noted that in three months (March, April, and May 1961), 323 mujahideen entered the country—each carrying two rifles, approximately 1000 bullets, and a number of hand grenades. Their destinations included the First, Second, Fourth, Fifth, and Seventh Regions. However, many of them were martyred along the way during infiltration attempts or as a result of ambushes set by enemy forces. (Kantari, 1995, pp. 125-124)

6 . Some Border Battles:

Battle of Zailou – February 1958: During this battle, 14 mujahideen were martyred and 16 French soldiers were killed. Following the battle, weapon supply routes were changed to other regions and became less frequent, especially after the tightening of surveillance and blockade along the Challe Line on the Moroccan border. The area around Mount Asfour witnessed a significant number of martyrs due to these measures. (Tabeharti, 2007)

Rafail Farm – April 1959: Lasted for three hours and involved both light and heavy weaponry. Five mujahideen were martyred.

Battle of Thniyat Er-Ramlah – May 17, 1961: Took place in the heights of Mount Asfour. The clash began when a platoon of the National Liberation Army attempted to cross the line, triggering an anti-group mine explosion, resulting in five martyrs and ten wounded, including Bouriche Omar, who was later transferred to the Oujda hospital for treatment.

Battle of Dghellal – March 11, 1959: It took place between Zouia and Mount Asfour. The battle began after a battalion crossed the line under the orders of Chief of Staff Houari Boumediene. Colonial forces pursued and eliminated the entire battalion, including its commander, First Lieutenant Khiari.

Battle of El-Maleha – Late 1958: Its clashes lasted two-hour-long ~~clashes~~ between the Border Army and colonial forces, with no recorded casualties on either side. (Ammar, 2007)

7 . The Impact of the Challe and Morice Lines on the Activities of the National Liberation Army:

Arms and supply operations across the Moroccan border faced increasing difficulties and setbacks, especially after the Morice Line was reinforced by the Challe Line. This severely affected the revolutionary movement, particularly after 1959, as the lines were equipped with electrified fences, light signals, electronic devices, minefields, observation posts, and patrolling units. (Buchoud, 1972, pp. 1245-1246)

The French authorities exhausted all available options to eliminate revolutionary activity along the Moroccan border. Movement along the border became extremely risky and perilous. As a result, many mujahideen were burned alive or blown apart while attempting to cross, or suffered serious injuries due to anti-personnel mines. (Khireddine, 1985, p. 216) In this context, Mujahid Abdelmalek Wassti stated:

“...Our last crossing cost us forty soldiers. They were heavily loaded with ammunition, making their movement slow. All of them perished between the first lines...” . (Youssef El-Khatib, 1989, p. 34)

This suffocating blockade along the Moroccan border forced the interior wilayas to redirect their efforts toward reviving weapon supply routes from the eastern border. In this regard, Commander Tayeb Siddiqi agreed with Colonel Amirouche, noting that in the beginning of 1957, most of the Third Wilaya's weapon convoys were redirected toward the eastern frontier. (Mohamed, 2012)

8 . Conclusion

The military strategy adopted by the National Liberation Army along the borders—especially regarding methods of breaching barbed-wire fences to transport weapons, ammunition, and battalions—led to serious consequences and heavy losses between 1958 and 1961. However, this does not mean that all supply operations failed; many were successful, especially those conducted by the battalions that reached the First and Fifth Wilayas.

At the same time, the General Staff achieved significant results, forcing enemy forces into extreme vigilance along the western border.

Despite the heavy losses endured by the National Liberation Army, it did not fail. It adapted to the circumstances and intensified its efforts to explore new ways to bring weapons into the interior. This success was not merely due to bravery and heroism, but also to meticulous military planning and precise logistical organization. The crossings of the Morice and Challe Lines became true heroic epics, transforming many formerly restricted border areas into liberated zones under the control of the mujahideen.

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