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The Challe Plan and the French Decisive Military Gamble in Historical Wilaya IV: Operation Courroie and the ALN Counter-Strategy (April–June 1959)

Dr. Mostefa Bensilette

Specialization: Military History of Algeria Through the Ages

Email: bensilette2014@gmail.com

Dr. Khelifa Lasledj

University of Algiers 2 (Algeria)

Email: khelifa.lasledj@univ-alger2.dz

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Abstract

General Charles de Gaulle's return to power in 1958 marked a decisive new phase in French policy toward the Algerian Revolution. His strategy rested on the premise that Algeria could be retained under French sovereignty by fulfilling two interdependent conditions: first, eradicating the National Liberation Army (ALN) and dismantling its armed operational capacity; second, launching socioeconomic reforms aimed at containing the civilian population and severing its ties with the revolution. To execute the military component of this grand strategy, de Gaulle reorganized the high command by appointing General Maurice Challe as Commander-in-Chief. Challe formulated an expansive military doctrine—subsequently known as the 'Challe Plan'—premised on massive sweeps, sequential territorial pacification from west to east, and the systematic dismantling of ALN structures across historical Wilayas. Within this framework, Operation Courroie (The Belt), launched against Historical Wilaya IV in April 1959, constituted one of the plan's largest offensives, mobilizing unprecedented French human and material resources. However, it encountered formidable field resistance and extraordinary operational adaptability from the ALN leadership under Colonel Si M'hamed Bouguerra. By adopting a flexible counter-strategy rooted in tactical unit dispersion, psychological resilience, and

guerrilla maneuvering, the ALN absorbed the intense military pressure and successfully thwarted France's strategic goal of achieving a definitive military breakthrough.

Keywords: *Algerian Revolution, Challe Plan, Operation Courroie, National Liberation Army (ALN), Historical Wilaya IV, Counter-insurgency, Quadrillage, Guerrilla Warfare.*

1. Introduction

Following his appointment to replace General Raoul Salan at the head of the French High Command in Algeria, General Maurice Challe confronted an operational reality that had demonstrated the structural limitations of past military strategies in extinguishing the Algerian Revolution. This necessitated a comprehensive, highly organized military doctrine, which crystallized into the 'Challe Plan'—a program upon which French military and political circles pinned immense hopes for achieving a definitive field breakthrough and terminating ALN military activities.

The Challe Plan was anchored in large-scale sequential sweeps executed by massive conventional forces and specialized mobile reserves, progressing geographically from western Algeria toward the east. Each operation targeted a specific historical Wilaya to comb its mountainous strongholds, encircle guerrilla units, and dismantle their politico-military apparatus. In early February 1959, Challe ordered the immediate execution of his plan, commencing in Historical Wilaya V with Operation Couronne (The Crown). In April 1959, French forces pivoted toward Historical Wilaya IV to initiate the second major phase, codenamed Operation Courroie (The Belt), followed sequentially across the remaining Wilayas.

This study investigates the extent to which Operation Courroie achieved its strategic military objectives in Historical Wilaya IV, and analyzes the operational counter-strategy devised by the ALN leadership to withstand, absorb, and counteract this unprecedented counter-insurgency offensive.

2. Operation Courroie: Operational Architecture, Troop Strength, and Execution Strategy

2.1 Geographical Extension and Operational Scope

As an operational continuation of the Challe Plan, General Challe advanced his forces into Historical Wilaya IV on April 18, 1959, launching Operation Courroie, which lasted for two consecutive months until June 18, 1959. Conceived as a direct extension of Operation Couronne—which originated in the Ouarsenis mountains and swept through parts of Wilaya V—Courroie unfolded as a massive pincer offensive. It swept from the eastern Ouarsenis mountains in the west across the Wilaya's eastern boundaries, encompassing the Lakhdaria, Zbarbar, Bouzegza, and Bougaadoun ranges. The operation encompassed the Dahra massif, the Blidean Atlas toward Tenes and Zaccar, and the Titteri mountains, systematically covering central-western Algeria.

The operation proceeded in a circular, tightening cordon—giving rise to its operational codename 'Courroie' (The Belt). French forces sought to deny ALN katibas any respite to reorganize for counter-engagements. Challe intended to extinguish guerrilla warfare, expanding territorial 'pacification' from the Mitidja plains through Kabylia and Chlef (El Asnam), consolidating the 'cleansing' operations initiated from Oran.

2.2 Troop Strength and Tactical Formations

General Jacques Massu was appointed Commander-in-Chief of Operation Courroie, assisted by his deputy, General Gracieux, and Chief of Staff Henri Fournié-Forsche. Challe allocated between 40,000 and 50,000 elite troops from combined arms services. According to Air Brigade General Michel Forget, the General Reserve units comprised 8 regiments, 1 mechanized battalion, and 3 commando units—aligning with official French military archives (SHAT) detailing 9 general reserve regiments and 2 Air Force commando detachments (Commandos de l'Air).

The offensive was reinforced by 10 artillery batteries and units from the Algiers Army Corps Command (Corps d'Armée d'Alger - CAA), which contributed 3 frontline battalions daily. Primary combat units included the 10th Parachute Division (10e DP) commanded by General Gracieux, supported by military engineering corps tasked with opening logistical access corridors. Participating elements included the 5th Artillery Unit, the 2nd Marine Commando Parachute Detachment, the 1st Marine Parachute Regiment (1er RPIMa), armored cavalry regiments stationed at Tiaret and Tenes, the 20th Parachute Division stationed at Chlef, and the 3rd Marine Parachute Regiment (3e RPIMa) under Colonel Marcel Bigeard and Colonel Trinquier. These ground forces were backed by Tactical Air Command (GATAC), utilizing 3 helicopter squadrons for air-assault insertions, fighter-bombers, reconnaissance aircraft, and Sikorsky helicopters for tactical troop transport.

2.3 Execution and Counter-Insurgency Mechanisms

General Massu deployed an intricate operational grid designed to counter ALN dispersion and evasion tactics. French forces established a tight cordon around the operational perimeter, reinforcing general reserve units with sector troops and commandos. These units maintained ceaseless pressure on ALN formations attempting to break out toward Berrouaghia, Aumale (Sour El Ghozlane), and Tablat. General reserve units operated on a 4:1 operational tempo (four days of combat operations to one day of rest), mobilizing 7 tactical units reinforced daily by 3 CAA battalions. Fast-attack commando hunter teams (commandos de chasse) pursued insurgent trails, transmitting live coordinates to central command for rapid airstrikes and mechanized encirclement. The execution rested upon four primary pillars:

- **A. Construction of Military Fortifications:** Massu established permanent outposts and observation posts on dominant mountain peaks, creating prohibited zones to monitor insurgent movements. Village perimeters, railway lines, and bridges were secured with searchlight surveillance. French forces penetrated historic insurgent sanctuaries, including Soufflat, Zbarbar, Mouzaïa, Djebel Ellouh, Montenotte, Cherchell heights, and the eastern Ouarsenis. Out of 29 projected fortifications under the expanded quadrillage plan, 21 fortified bases were completed, with heavy concentrations in Djebel Ellouh, the Khemis Miliana–Médéa highway, the Braz region, and south Lakhdaria. Military engineering corps constructed 191 km of new tactical roads and upgraded 178 km of existing tracks to facilitate motorized logistics.
- **B. Implementation of Comprehensive Pacification Policies:** Massu expanded territorial quadrillage, establishing 32 regroupment centers (including 12 in the Lakhdaria sector) and 30 Specialized Administrative Sections (Sections Administratives Spécialisées - SAS) to monitor the civilian population and sever logistical support to the ALN. He established 10 pacification teams, 7 SAS sections in Bordj Menaïel and north Algiers, 4 schools in Lakhdaria and Bordj Menaïel, and youth training centers in Mohammadia with 10 youth leadership teams. In Médéa, Boghar, and Sour El Ghozlane, French authorities opened 5 sports complexes, recruited 32 self-defense militias (Groupes d'Auto-Défense - GAD), and installed 80 douar administrators to isolate the

populace. Simultaneously, the 5th Bureau (Psychological Warfare) disseminated disinformation to foster paranoia within ALN ranks. This psychological manipulation precipitated an internal security crisis in Wilaya IV, leading Colonel Bouguerra to conduct an internal purge affecting 486 cadres and soldiers (the 'Bleuite' conspiracy).

- **C. Forcible Regroupment Centers and Interrogation:** Dozens of internment camps were established across Wilaya IV, holding approximately one-third of the Wilaya's civilian population forcibly evacuated from rural douars. Surrounded by barbed wire and monitored by SAS detachments, these centers functioned to eliminate civilian sanctuaries. Regroupment escalated sharply in high-altitude zones such as Ouarsenis, Zaccar, Dahra, and Djebel Ellouh. By late 1960, the number of regrouped civilians reached 342,000 (Chlef: 240,000; Médéa: 80,000; Algiers rural: 40,000). Entire hamlets in Bordj Bounaama, Boucaid, and Lazharia were evacuated via military convoys; historically, over 8,000 rural villages were destroyed, displacing between 2.5 and 3 million Algerians nationwide. Military intelligence centers and the 2nd Bureau conducted systematic interrogations of detainees, suspects, and captured guerrillas to identify ALN military and political networks.

- **D. Psychological Operations and Infiltration:** French psychological warfare bureaus deployed extensive propaganda to erode civilian trust in the ALN. Intelligence services orchestrated false-flag operations, deploying 'turned' ex-guerrillas and counterfeit nationalist cells into insurgent strongholds under the guise of evading French detection, leading to localized raids against civilian hamlets, such as the douars of Theniet El Had near Djebel Ellouh.

3. ALN Counter-Strategy: Operational Adaptation and Asymmetric Resistance

During the initial phase of Operation Courroie, ALN forces engaged in conventional field resistance. Katibas from Wilaya IV, joined by retreating units from Wilaya V, unified under Colonel Si M'hamed Bouguerra into a consolidated battalion, executing concentrated strikes to prevent French forces from establishing fortifications and roads. For 44 consecutive days, ferocious daily clashes occurred across the Wilaya up to Tablat.

Faced with overwhelming French air superiority and tightening cordons, ALN command abandoned conventional stand-up battles. In response, Colonel Bouguerra instituted structural operational adaptations:

- **1. Tactical Decentralization and Guerrilla Maneuvering:** Units abandoned fixed battle lines. Large battalions and katibas were systematically divided into platoons (firqas) and small squads (fawj) of 5 to 10 fighters. This dispersion denied French aviation concentrated targets and allowed small groups to evade aerial sweeps, re-aggregating only for rapid ambushes before dispersing again.
- **2. Strategic Breakout into Lowland Sanctuaries:** Commanders ordered units to break out of mountainous encirclement zones into lowland agricultural plains. Units that sustained minimal casualties were those that relocated to the plains of Chlef, Sersou, and the Mitidja. The Zoubiria Katiba, commanded by Lakhdar Bouregaa, survived largely intact in Montenotte (Titteri) through fierce defensive actions before adopting flexible evasion.
- **3. Urban Infiltration and Shifting the Front:** The ALN shifted operational pressure from remote peaks to urban centers and populated lowlands (Médéa, Chlef, Blida), compelling French forces to divert garrison troops, while securing logistical provisions and conducting rapid urban hit-and-run strikes.
- **4. Elimination of Traitors and Armed Collaborators:** Fidai units executed targeted strikes against French auxiliaries. In April 1959, a platoon under Mohamed Dendane ambushed an armed collaborator center in

Beni Bouattab (Chlef), neutralizing 5 collaborators and capturing 4 rifles. Concurrently, the Krimia Katiba, under Si Farid, launched a nocturnal assault on the center of Bachagha Boualam, inflicting severe casualties.

- **5. Preemptive Food Supply and Agricultural Support:** To counter starvation tactics in declared 'forbidden zones,' specialized ALN agricultural units cultivated hidden plots, provided financial stipends to local farmers, and established human supply chains carrying grain on foot from the plains to mountain caches.
- **6. Underground Caches and Urban Logistics:** The ALN constructed subterranean bunkers in residential dwellings near towns and remote plains to conceal military uniforms, munitions, tailoring workshops, and manual grain mills.
- **7. Counter-Propaganda and Communications Security:** In response to French regional radio broadcasts in Chlef, ALN political cadres distributed clandestine tracts, painted revolutionary slogans on public roads, and conducted town meetings. Strictest communications protocols were enforced: revolutionary documents were destroyed immediately after operational use, radio encryption codes were rotated bi-weekly, and civilian couriers traveling via public transport (trains, commercial vehicles) replaced vulnerable mountain messengers.
- **8. 'Wasp' Hit-and-Run Tactics (Bouzenel):** Colonel Bouguerra instructed the Zoubiria Katiba to operate like a wasp (Bouzenel)—striking swiftly and disengaging immediately before French motorized reserves and air support could arrive. The operational maxim shifted from inflicting maximum casualties to capturing arms with minimal loss. As Commander Youcef Khatib noted: 'Guerrilla warfare alone was capable of confronting General Challe and repelling his offensives; it was the strategy that saved us.'
- **9. Mobile Medical Care and Female Combatant Mobilization:** Static mountain clinics were replaced by mobile field medics who accompanied combat units. Seriously wounded fighters were treated in concealed subterranean infirmaries. Simultaneously, female militants assumed expanded roles in rural intelligence, logistics, and sewing uniforms within covert sanctuaries.
- **10. Structural Reorganization of Historical Wilaya IV:** The Wilaya leadership established a 5th Zone encompassing the border strip along Wilaya VI (Ksar El Boukhari, Ain Boucif, Sidi Aïssa, Sour El Ghoulane) to coordinate with Wilaya III and establish a rear logistical base at Bougaadoun and El Kaf El Akhdar. A 6th Zone was created for Algiers to replace the dismantled autonomous zone (Zone Autonome d'Alger), dividing the capital region into two operational sectors stretching from Oued El Harrach to Oued Mazafran and south to the Blidean Atlas.

4. Operational Outcomes and Strategic Assessment

Despite vast technological and numerical superiority, French archival records confirm that Operation Courroie failed to achieve its ultimate strategic objective of eradicating the ALN in Wilaya IV. Nevertheless, the offensive inflicted severe organizational damage between April 18 and June 18, 1959. French intelligence estimated that Wilaya IV lost approximately 40% of its overall military, logistics, and organizational capacity during this operational window.

Tragically, the Wilaya lost its supreme commander, Colonel Si M'hamed Bouguerra, who was martyred in combat in the Médéa sector on May 5, 1959, alongside 10 zone commanders, 12 sector commanders, and 4 katiba commanders. A parallel campaign against the political-administrative apparatus (OPA) led to the arrest of 940 members out of 1,458 active cadres, and the destruction of 340 clandestine shelters, 2 weapon workshops, 3 field clinics, and 13 tons of foodstuffs.

Table 1: ALN Personnel Losses and Weaponry Seizures During Operation Courroie

Category	Courroie Operational Zone	External Zones (Wilaya IV)	Total Losses
Killed in Action (KIA)	1,756	865	2,621
Prisoners of War (POWs)	471	323	794
Detained / Intercepted	941	517	1,458
Interned in Regroupment Centers	13	279	292
Military War Weapons	595 (incl. 29 heavy/crew-served)	245 (incl. 06 heavy/crew-served)	840 (incl. 34 heavy/crew-served)
Handguns / Sidearms	244	227	471
Hunting Rifles	421	321	742

Table 2: French Military Casualties and Materiel Losses During Operation Courroie

Category	Courroie Operational Zone	External Zones (Wilaya IV)	Total Losses
Killed in Action (KIA)	166	100	266
Wounded in Action (WIA)	262	218	480
Captured / Missing in Action	1	26	27
Military Rifles / War Weapons	46	35	81
Personal Sidearms	2	7	9

5. Conclusion

The operational trajectory of Operation Courroie demonstrates that while overwhelming French numerical, technological, and tactical air superiority exerted massive attrition upon the ALN in Historical Wilaya IV, it failed to eliminate its operational viability. Through rapid tactical decentralization, evasion of static mass confrontations, and the execution of asymmetric hit-and-run strikes, the ALN minimized French encirclement opportunities. French operational records confirm the extreme difficulty encountered in tracking these highly mobile guerrilla detachments, noting that General Reserve units engaged ALN fighters only under exceptional circumstances.

Consequently, the military outcome cannot be evaluated solely by immediate battlefield losses, but by strategic endurance. Despite intense attrition, the ALN preserved its organizational continuity, re-established its political-military infrastructure in areas declared 'pacified' by French authorities, and prevented France from converting tactical battlefield dominance into a definitive strategic victory.

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