

# NORTH AFRICA SHAKES FRANCE

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**A**BOUT two months before the barbarous and brutal bombing and strafing of the Tunisian border village of Sakiét Sidi Youssef, French Government officials were boasting that the rebellion in Algeria was 'militarily at an end' and that the policy of 'pacification' had been an unqualified success. At about the same time the French Foreign Minister, M. Christian Pineau, solemnly declared to the United Nations that 'practically all over Algeria, life has returned to normal'.

However, towards the end of January it had to be admitted that the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) was still capable of launching heavy attacks against the huge French army of occupation. On January 11 there had been an ambush near Sakiét in which the French lost fifteen killed and four prisoners to a nationalist force. The French Government reacted to this incident by breaking off negotiations then being held with the Tunisian Government on future relations between the two countries. Right-wing deputies in Paris urged the Government to take military action against the Tunisians and the colonialists in Algeria demanded the evacuation of a zone fifty kilometres broad in Tunisia near its frontier with Algeria. In this zone the French troops were to be instructed to bombard indiscriminately all convoys, camps, depots and concentrations of men.

The French have always claimed that the war in Algeria would have been over long ago but for the help rendered to the nationalists from Tunisia. So for several months they have maintained constant aerial patrols along the Algerian-Tunisian frontier. On the ground the French army has built the 'Morice Line', a 150-mile long electrified barbed-wire fence along the railway from Bone in the north to Tebessa in the south. For operating among the rocky hills, impenetrable woods and thick scrub of the no-man's-land between the 'Morice Line' and the actual frontier, is a specially trained nationalist commando force equipped with insulated wire cutters. This force creates many diversions drawing the French troops away from the main break-through area.

In early February, FLN ambushes and raids became more frequent and more daring resulting in the course of a few days in some 100 French casualties. Even the heavily guarded railway

line between the new Saharan oilfields and the port of Philippeville, more than fifty miles westward of the 'Morice Line', was blown up twice in ten days. French army commanders admitted that the FLN was 'incomparably better armed' than a year ago. As an indication of growing nationalist strength *France-Soir*, quoting official sources, said that while twenty-seven French planes had been hit by ground fire in November the number had risen to forty in December and seventy in January. It was also estimated that the nationalist army had grown from 25,000 to 30,000. (Some sources put it even as high as 70,000.)

Stung by the realisation that it was as far off as ever from winning the war—and winning it had become imperative if only as a 'face-saver' for the French army—the Gaillard Government completely lost its head. And the result was the bombing of Sakiet which for inhuman savagery rivalled the fascist bombing of the little Basque town of Guernica during the Spanish civil war.

As at Guernica it was market day in Sakiet and the streets were crowded with peasants and their children. As if to make sure they obtained the highest possible number of victims the planes attacked just before noon when the crowds were at their densest. Of the twenty-five planes taking part in the raid, seventeen were U.S.-made fighters and light bombers. This fact was not lost on the survivors. Cried one of them: 'They did it with American planes, bombs and bullets!' Unable to deny that the French had used planes supplied to them by the Americans, U.S. Senators, Congressmen and others have been at pains to explain that the planes used had been obtained by the French through a straight commercial deal and not through the NATO agreement.

In Paris, Prime Minister Gaillard refused to recognise his Government's culpability and at first insisted that the majority of the victims were soldiers of the FLN. On the other hand, Foreign Minister Christian Pineau, evidently dismayed by the attack and the effect it would have on the French cause in North Africa, went so far as to allow himself, in an interview with the *New York Herald Tribune's* Joseph Alsop, to describe the bombing as 'a sad error'. Pineau later claimed that a few imprudent words uttered off the record had been 'distorted'. Under sharp examination before the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee, Pineau finally admitted that neither he, nor the Cabinet nor M. Robert Lacoste, Minister Resident in Algeria, had known previously of the decision to attack Sakiet. The order to bomb the village which had resulted in world wide obloquy for France had in fact been given by a local

commander acting on vague instructions authorising retaliatory measures in the event of raids in the immediate frontier areas.

The Sakiet bombing not only exposed France's 'civilising mission' claims in Algeria: it put President Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia in an untenable position. He hastened to make an offer to accept U.S. mediation which could hardly have pleased the French. For during the course of the Algerian war the French have resisted any attempt to 'internationalise' the problem. To the monotonous refrain, 'L'Algerie, c'est la France' they have striven to keep Britain and the U.S. in particular from taking too close an interest in what they regard as a legitimate French sphere of interest. In the U.S. the Sakiet bombing was held to have blown sky-high all France's objections about 'meddling' in her affairs in North Africa. The *Christian Science Monitor* wrote that though France may object to international interference in the Algerian problem this 'does not exclude *all* (my emphasis—D.B.) international help in solving it'.

Gaillard was forced to match Bourguiba's offer by announcing his Government's willingness to accept 'the good offices' of the U.S. and Britain in settling the dispute between France and Tunisia. French officials quickly explained that 'good offices' did not mean mediation and still less arbitration. In their view all that was intended was help in bringing the disputing parties together. And, of course, nothing was to be said about Algeria; only Sakiet and the problem of French troops in Tunisia and their movements within that country. The future of Bizerta, the large naval base, could also be discussed although the French Government made it clear from the beginning that it had no intention of giving it up. Pineau declared that the only concessions France was prepared to make were those that served her self-interest, such as the proposal to set up a Franco-Tunisian commission to control the frontier.

The decision of the Americans to undertake the 'good offices' effort was received with delight by Bourguiba. He quickly agreed to postpone the Security Council debate which he had asked for. The debate was to have dealt not only with the immediate issue of Sakiet but also with the whole question of French conduct in North Africa. The French themselves had lodged a counter complaint with the Security Council accusing Tunisia of permitting the Algerian nationalists to launch attacks from Tunisian soil. However much the French Government tried to keep Algeria out of the dispute it kept on intruding. After all, Sakiet was only an issue arising out of a very much larger problem and that problem was Algeria. The French, notably M. Chaban Delmas, the Minister of

Defence, claim that there would be no Algerian problem but for Tunisian support of the insurgents. Yet they want no reference to Algeria in settling their dispute with Tunisia!

Bourguiba in fact saved France's face and her allies much embarrassment by postponing the Security Council debate. Having won this respite, the western allies lost no time in getting on with their 'good offices' effort. However, the choice of Robert Murphy to represent the U.S. State Department caused dismay in Paris. *Le Monde* and *Le Parisien* recalled Murphy's war-time antipathy towards Free France and his attempts to prevent Free French forces from liberating French territory. *Le Monde*, however, found some comfort in the fact that Murphy could not be said to have any particular sympathy for Bourguiba and the FLN either. It is difficult to say who is the more angry with the other: Bourguiba with the French or the French with Bourguiba. Making the best of a bad situation the French Government has tentatively suggested the establishment of a Western Mediterranean defence pact and a Franco-North African economic union for the development of the Sahara. It is said that the original idea was hatched in the fertile brain of Mr. Dulles; but the French Government modified it with the implication that Algeria's participation should be only as a part of France. Algeria, said M. Gaillard in referring to his plan in a speech in Chartres, is the umbilical cord between France and Africa and if it were lost the Republican régime in France would 'die of shock'. In a pointed reference to M. Bourguiba, M. Gaillard said: 'We shall see by their reply if certain chiefs-of-state, who loudly proclaim their attachment to the West do so in a spirit of blackmail, or from personal conviction'.

Yet Bourguiba's attachment to the West is real. Only a couple of days before the Sakiét incident he warned France in a broadcast to settle the Algerian problem quickly, since the recently established Syrian-Egyptian union might prove an irresistible attraction for the Arabs of North Africa. He said:

If the Algerian people, despairing of the West, begin to slide down the attractive slope which has already drawn onwards the peoples already disappointed by the West and now counting instead on Russia, there is a chance of all Africa following the movement.

On innumerable occasions Bourguiba has declared his devotion to the West and his hostility towards the Soviet Union, Nasser's Egypt and towards anyone opposed to the West. He curbed the power of his Minister of the Interior, Taieb Mehri, because he was 'too

anti-French' and he dismissed the Minister of Youth and Sports, Azouz Rebai, accusing him of using his position to stir up anti-French sentiments among the Tunisian youth.

When the FLN established an office in Tunis, Bourguiba regarded it as an excellent opportunity for him to wean the Algerian movement away from the Liberation Committee of the Arab Maghreb in Cairo and from Nasser's influence. At the same time, by keeping up supplies to the nationalist army in Algeria, he would be carrying out the wishes of the Tunisian people and, indeed, of all North African Arabs. Bourguiba has never made any secret of the help he has been giving to the Algerian nationalists; but he has, not without reason, expected the French Government to understand his position. 'Why shouldn't we help them? We are not at war with Algeria. And if we did not help them they would look for help in Cairo or Prague', says a Tunisian official admitting that Algerian nationalist troops enter Tunisian territory for medical treatment and recuperation.

In France itself on top of the nation-wide shock consequent upon the Sakiet incident came the publication of M. Henri Alleg's book, *La Question*, in which he gives a detailed account of tortures he suffered at the hands of French parachutists after they had arrested him in Algiers last June. Even right-wing journals have not been able to keep silent before the national wave of indignation at what *Le Monde* describes as 'a debasement of spirit unworthy of men who wear the French uniform'. Alleg, a European Algerian, was formerly editor of the progressive *Alger Republicain* which was suppressed by the authorities in Algeria. One of his torturers told him: 'We'll do what we're doing here in France, too'. In that phrase even the densest Frenchman can see what the people of France owe in solidarity with the Algerian people. The demand in France for the ending of this unjust war which is bringing yet more international opprobrium to France is being made with ever greater insistence. A few days after the Sakiet incident a new campaign for ending the Algerian war was launched in an appeal signed by one hundred and eleven national figures in all walks of life. The great demonstration at the funeral of Marcel Cachin was not only in personal homage to a great working class leader. It was also an expression of support for the aims for which throughout his life he fought with unrelenting vigour. The right of the colonial people to self-determination was among these aims.

Bombs on Sakiet Sidi Youssef have blown away much of the apathy on the Seine.