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▶ To cite this version:

Emmanuel Blanchard. The Police and the "Algerian Medinas" in France. Argenteuil, 1957-1962. Métropolitiques, 2012, http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-police-and-the-Algerian.html. hal-00745785

HAL Id: hal-00745785
https://hal.science/hal-00745785v1

Submitted on 26 Oct 2012

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Emmanuel Blanchard

Fifty years after the end of the Algerian War of Independence, it should not be forgotten that this conflict was also played out in mainland France. Here, Emmanuel Blanchard shows the extent to which the control of territories with a strong Algerian presence was a key aspect of the war.

From the 1920s onwards, the town of Argenteuil, in the north-western suburbs of Paris, was one of the main places in the Paris region where migrants from North Africa were concentrated. This "North African colony of Argenteuil" (Mauco 1932, p. 346) did not pass unnoticed and was the subject of concerns, yet without generating any real intervention on the part of the authorities. At the end of World War II, in a town partly destroyed by bombing, one of the first officially recorded slums grew up around a ruined castle (Château Mirabeau, located in the area of Argenteuil known as Le Marais, or "The Marsh"). It was within this shanty town that the first police officer to be killed by Algerian nationalists on the mainland lost his life (on 8 October 1957). This murder heralded both a new stage in the grip of the forces of order on the Algerian population, and a new spatial and residential redeployment of Algerians in Argenteuil. As a result, police operations began to limit Algerians' ability to travel, yet these discriminatory measures failed to permanently weaken the FLM (National Liberation Front).

Impeded movements

Police operations such as raids on hotels, roadblocks, identity checks and the encirclement of entire neighbourhoods had an impact on all North African immigrants. The police made no distinction between nationalist militants and of other "North Africans". The former were, moreover, often discovered after their arrest and not previously identified through police investigations.

In addition to the restrictions on freedom of passage between *départements* on either side of the Mediterranean[1], introduced in 1956 (Blanchard 2011), this police action even reduced Algerians' ability to travel within the town. The "curfew" – a simple "advisory measure" suggested by the Prefect of Police[2], without any legal basis – adopted in September 1958, in retaliation for attacks by the FLN during the night of 24–25 August 1958, applied not only to the Seine *département* (Thénault 2008a). The "streets of Paris and the Paris suburbs" mentioned in the press release and memo from the police headquarters also included the *département* of Seine-et-Oise[3]:

[1] Translator's note: prior to independence, Algeria was divided into *départements* like the rest of France.

[2] Translator's note: at the time, the Prefect of Police was the head of the police in the old Seine *département* (which covered Paris and the inner suburbs, but not more distant suburbs such as Argenteuil).

[3] Translator's note: the old Seine-et-Oise *département* covered much of the outer suburbs, including Argenteuil.

> "The vast majority of French Muslims[4] refrain from going out between 9.30 p.m. And 6.00 a.m. However, though recent measures have the advantage of limiting terrorist acts at night, they do not prevent the habitual process of collecting dues, threats and attacks that is typical of the Frontist movement."[5]

The police did not seek to strictly enforce the curfew. Moreover, unlike the curfew of October 1961, it has not marked the memories of those interviewed. Most Algerians did indeed abstain from going out at night for fear not only of police checks, but also of score-settling between nationalists, usually perpetrated at night. The curfews in 1958 and 1961 therefore served only to tighten a grip that already existed during this period: the nocturnal wanderings of any "North African" were presumed to be suspicious and so, to avoid identity checks of uncertain outcome, it was better to stay home.

Car owners were subject to more stringent controls. As the "shock groups"[6] did not intervene in the places where their members lived, they mostly travelled by car. Rather than developing a fleet of vehicles, the FLN made the more economical and discreet choice of borrowing the vehicles of members or sympathizers for specific missions. Occasionally, these car owners, consenting or otherwise, were also tasked with driving members of "commando units" to the locations of their activities. At a time when private vehicles were still uncommon among the working classes, police suspicion would be immediately aroused by any Algerian owner of a car. It is in this context that, from the summer of 1958, provisions were put in place to enable the "impoundment [...] of any suspicious vehicle".[7] In this case, too, there was no legal basis for this discriminatory measure. It was therefore never officially acknowledged that it concerned all "French Muslims from Algeria", even if, from August 1958, instructions were particularly clear on this point:

> "I expect the firm application of these regulations to result in the complete paralysis of vehicular traffic of all types – cars, trucks, scooters, etc. – used by the FLN [...]. I therefore invite you to issue the necessary guidelines to all departments under your authority in order to ensure that all such vehicles are intercepted and that the option of impoundment is made available."[8]

Despite the insistence of the ministry, only two cars were impounded in May 1959 across the whole Seine-et-Oise *département*: cars and mopeds had become too conspicuous, as they were one of the key elements that police looked for. The interior ministry's aim of achieving "total paralysis of automobile traffic (or by any other mechanical means of transport) on the mainland by "*FSNA*" [French of North African origin] suspects"[9] and conflicted with other policing priorities. The movements of Algerians were, nonetheless, largely hampered: the proliferation of roadblocks and identity checks did not encourage travel, and car ownership was a clear factor in police suspicion.

Slum clearance and rehousing: the police gain the upper hand

Limitations on the freedom of movement in mainland France should be considered in connection with the spaces in which Algerians were allowed to settle. There were no (infra-) legislative

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4 The term "*Français musulmans*" ("French Muslims") here refers to the former legal and administrative category called "*Français musulmans d'Algérie*" ("French Muslims from Algeria"), which defined the rights and citizenship limits of colonised Algerians between 1944 and 1962.

5 Renseignements Généraux (general intelligence service) of Argenteuil (hereafter "RGA"), Yvelines Departmental Archives (hereafter "AD 78") 1104W 84bis, 8 September 1958.

6 The term "shock groups" was used by the police to designate armed groups or commando units of the FLN's Special Organisation.

7 Interior ministry instructions to all prefects, 16 September 1958, Archives of the Prefecture of Police (APP), HA 83.

8 "*Contrôle de la circulation des Nord-Africains*" ("Controlling the movements of North Africans"), circular no. 580 sent to all prefects, 17 October 1958, AD 78 1W 509.

9 The terms "*FSNA*" (*Français de souche nord-africaine*) and "*FSE*" (*Français de souche européenne*) were used above all by the military to distinguish between "French people of North African origin" and "French people of European origin".

interventions in this regard, but economic difficulties and xenophobia had forced Algerians to live in the nooks and crannies of towns and cities, either in rooming hotels and lodging houses that constituted a form of "segregated housing", or in the form various forms of "squatting" in unsanitary buildings or public spaces (Michel 1956). Argenteuil was particularly emblematic of this separation of Algerian accommodation from that of rest of the population, even other immigrants. The police very rarely ventured into the slums of the Marais area of the town. These neighbourhoods, despite having their own shops, were, however, far from being self-sufficient. Checks and raids were therefore generally performed when residents left the slums to go to work or to socialise, particularly in cafés and the "Arab cinemas",[10] located in the town centre.

From 1958, due to the creation of Sonacotral (*Société nationale de construction pour les travailleurs algériens* – National Construction Company for Algerian Workers) two years earlier, but mainly because policing priorities had changed, a new division of residential spaces was implemented. The slums of Argenteuil were no longer considered to be a means of confining the Algerian population and the internal violence of the nationalist movement, but increasingly seemed more akin to "impenetrable" rear bases of the FLN. They therefore had to be eradicated and their inhabitants rehoused in hostels.

To the chagrin of the communist mayor, who had been calling for such measures since the late 1940s, they were only destroyed in late 1958, some 10 years after they were first built. This long delay can be explained by two mean reasons. First, it was out of the question to even consider destroying hundreds of "huts" until some sort of minimum rehousing programme had been funded and implemented; such a programme was delayed, in turn, as a result of coordination problems between the prefectural level and municipal councils, especially communist-majority councils, whom councillors of other political persuasions were happy to see bear the brunt of the "North African problem." And secondly, the slums and shanty towns were a kind of focal point for the violence generated by the battle for Algerian independence, and thus their existence was useful in the local police's containment strategy.[11]

As long as violence did not spill over beyond the Château Mirabeau area, it was tolerated by the police, who did not make frequent patrols of the neighbourhood. In late 1957, however, the death of police officer Badens marked a turning point. The slum, whose population had increased considerably in the preceding months, now appeared to be a fortress from which the nationalists could operate without fearing reprisals from police, who did not know the "Algerian medina"[12] well enough to be effectively deployed. In addition to the fact that nationalist violence had turned against the police, the settling of scores between the MNA (Algerian National Movement) and the FLN had become so intense that it became impossible to ignore.[13] In the shanty town alone, there were apparently "up to six murders in one week".[14] On several occasions, it had been the location of veritable war scenes. On 8 December 1957, for instance, in the early hours of the morning, the Château Mirabeau shanty town was surrounded by 40 or so armed "nationalists" – probably members of the MNA from neighbouring towns – who had come to extort dues from residents present on the site. On the evening of 4 March 1958, a number of Messalists attacked the southern part of the shanty town, inhabited mainly by Tunisians. This attack, followed by an arson attempt, was extremely violent, leaving two dead; 70 firearms cartridges of different calibres were identified by the police, who arrived too late to make any arrests.

[10] Like many other towns that were home to large numbers of North African immigrants, Argenteuil had a cinema that showed practically nothing but Egyptian films.

[11] Internal violence within the Algerian community thus fostered very little police action and was even seen as a factor that weakened Algerian nationalism (Blanchard 2011; Meynier 2002, pp. 113 & 124).

[12] This expression was frequently used in both police reports and press articles. See, for example, "Heures chaudes dans la 'médina' de Paris. Une ville dans la ville", *Le Monde,* 21 June 1957 (article on the Goutte d'Or district of Paris, written by Bertrand Poirot-Delpech).

[13] The MNA (Algerian National Movement) was the party founded in 1955 by supporters of Messali Hadj, who had not joined the FLN (National Liberation Front), set up in autumn 1954.

[14] *Le Figaro*, 14 May 1958.

Although it is not possible to prove that this latest attack had been tolerated by the police, it certainly made things easier for the authorities: since the autumn, the decision had been taken to "clear the Argenteuil shanty town". To this end, police had been given a major role to play. In particular, senior officers were responsible for determining who was to be moved from the shanty town as a priority. For over a year, the local council, working closely with local police, had passed a by-law for the "demolition of empty huts in the shanty town." However, nothing came of it, due to a lack of new accommodation available to rehouse the inhabitants of these "huts". The departure of tens of Tunisians frightened by the attack of which they had just been the target presented an opportunity to reclaim the land and expel their compatriots who had not fled. Pictures taken during the "slum reduction" operations show that not all the evacuated huts had been vacated before they were burned down through the combined action of a dozen police officers, highways department employees and firefighters.[15]

By the end of 1958, the Château Mirabeau shanty town had been "totally cleared", even though only one temporary shelter with 60 beds had been opened, in October 1957. The Sonacotral hostels – the first to open in mainland France – only came later: the first, with 240 beds, in January 1959; the second, with 150 beds, in November 1959. These openings, long discussed, had been made possible thanks to the removal of institutional barriers (location, financing, etc.) and political barriers (in particular, local residents' opposition to the creation of these hostels) following the emotion aroused by the police attack police of October 1957. It became apparent at this time that the slum posed a major security problem that had to be "eliminated"; however, the number of long-term rehousing solutions on offer was clearly insufficient. According to those handling the affair at the prefecture, slum-clearance operations could only be considered once "half of the accommodation" required for rehousing were ready for habitation.[16] Even then, they knew full well that "the (reduced) slum would move and set up elsewhere." Nonetheless, this remained a way to relocate the difficulties and disrupt the nationalists.

In Argenteuil, even after the construction of new homes in the early 1960s,[17] the 50% ratio was far from being achieved: the few hundred bed spaces were nowhere near enough to accommodate the 1,500 to 2,500 residents who lived on the Château Mirabeau site before destruction operations began. While it is true that the land around Château Mirabeau was turned over to the construction of sports facilities and industrial areas, a number of micro-slums reappeared in parcels of unoccupied land in the town. On the other side of the Seine, the shanty town at Nanterre saw its population swell with the arrival of those expelled from the Marais in Argenteuil, where town-centre lodging houses and rooming hotels continued to accommodate the majority of Algerians in the town. Despite a few rare closures – for political rather than health reasons – the overcrowding in these establishments was constant. The FLN was well established there, and found that this form of accommodation was an effective way to organise the collection of dues and disseminate its instructions.

Despite the inadequate hostel-building programmes, specialists in "Muslim affairs" at the interior ministry complained until 1961 that accommodation centres opened by the public authorities met with little success, mainly because of instructions issued by the nationalist leaders. In Argenteuil, housing difficulties were such, however, that hostels were quickly filled up. The FLN did not organise a boycott of these hostels, as they were rapidly able to exert their control over them. In the face of its powers of organisation and retaliation, the hostel managers – mostly former civil servants or military personnel from Algeria – turned a blind eye to, or even facilitated, the collection of dues and the dissemination of instructions by an organisation that was able to impose a certain discipline

[15] The letter from the senior officer responsible for the operation to his superior (22 March 1958) was accompanied by six photos, on which a number of individuals with baggage could be identified, who were clearly living in the destroyed huts. AD 78 1W 1854.

[16] Intervention on the part of the technical advisor for Muslim affairs at the prefecture of Seine-et-Oise, 24 October 1957. AD 78 1W 1856.

[17] A 250-bed hostel opened in Bezons (immediately south-west of Argenteuil) in February 1961; two other hostels were built in Argenteuil at the end of the Algerian War.

on residents. The Sonacotral hostels were directly connected to the alarm panel at the central police station in Argenteuil, although this was not so much an attempt to impose police order as a means of ensuring the relative safety of hostel personnel. However, the best guarantee remained not to oppose or obstruct the FLN's plans. Those who did so risked reprisals that even ended in murder in some cases: the manager of a hostel in Poissy (a few miles west of Argenteuil) was killed on 16 April 1957, as was the manager of an accommodation centre in Saint-Cyr-l'École (near Versailles) on 8 June 1958, and a social worker was shot in Gennevilliers (between Paris and Argenteuil) in October 1960.

The police gained no advantage from this redistribution of the Algerian population among the accommodation available locally. Moreover, the supervision of this population was also limited by the institutional shortcomings of the police: long after the Château Mirabeau shanty town had been destroyed, the interior ministry, unaware of local realities, continued to place Algerians released from internment camps in mainland France under house arrest. For its part, the police in Argenteuil was often unable to find administrative records for individuals who had been reported, put on file or even arrested. Such bureaucratic incompetence only helped strengthen the FLN.

The FLN: a disciplinarian organisation

Consequently, it was the main nationalist organisation that exercised the real control over the Algerians in the Argenteuil area. The "FLN police", also known as the "monitoring and espionage committee", identified "deserters from the organisation", ensuring that no one escaped paying the mandatory dues. Sometimes, the FLN would even go so far as to perform identity checks on the streets to verify the "nationality" of people in the area and consolidate its grip on all Algerians. This controlling approach to the North African population, and the process of punishing those who did not cede to the authority of the FLN, also included justice commissions. These were not just revolutionary courts for punishing "traitors" and other dissidents; in the Argenteuil area, the documents seized by police show that the justice commission intervened in all aspects of day-to-day life that required legal or moral arbitration. It was "designed to remove Muslims from the French courts" and prepare the Algerians "for self-determination and the acquisition of independence".[18] Local police officers discovered the extent of the powers of the "arbitration commission" during the winter of 1959–1960. In the report filed on this subject by two senior officers, the lack of any mention of coercion or violence contrasts starkly with the usual descriptions of the FLN's activities. This shift in outlook, as well as the vocabulary used, shows that these high-ranking officers in the national police force had a certain admiration for the organisation in place:

> "In terms of competence 'ratione materiae', the cases brought before it are first and foremost disputes which would normally be dealt with by our civil courts (sales contracts, separations between spouses, disputes between hotel owners and tenants, disputes between employers and employees, etc.), but the 'justice commission' also hears reports relating to disputes on payment of dues. [...] Decisions are made in the presence of two members of the commission, two 'neutral' witnesses and the parties concerned. In some cases, they result in contradictory reports, some of which take the form of real 'statements of defence'. For very severe cases, particularly when it comes to resolving a dispute involving a leader, the commission holds a 'plenary session'."[19]

All internal FLN affairs went before the justice commissions, including those relating to the (non-)payment of dues. In Argenteuil, it also functioned as a kind of notary's office combined with a "civil court" that intervened in property transactions and in certain sales of goods (cars, for

[18] Hearing of the leader of the justice commission for the Paris *wilāyah* ("province") by an investigating judge from Clermont-Ferrand, 17 February 1960, AD 78 1W 541.

[19] Report made by senior officers of the criminal investigation department and the 2nd criminal investigation brigade to the investigating judge at Versailles, 9 February 1960, AD 78 1455W 6.

example). It also arbitrated disputes relating to personal status and family life, sometimes in a way that was surprisingly favourable to women residing in the Argenteuil region.[20]

The justice commission was not the only organ of the FLN to operate in the Seine-et-Oise *département*: a support group for prisoners came to the assistance of a number of local activists incarcerated in prisons in the Paris region and Algeria or placed under house arrest in camps in mainland France (Thénault 2008b). There was also a health commission, and all militants were supposed to enforce its rulings. Its official role was to improve the lives of Algerians and address the behaviour of certain hotel owners. Although the local officials were not all going to "check the thickness of the soup" served,[21] the documentation seized suggests that hoteliers – overwhelmingly Algerian – were nonetheless required to comply with a number of standards in terms of hygiene and prices. Indeed, residents could report those who did not to the FLN, who, like the hotel owners, were supposed to maintain order in the rooming hotels and lodging houses. Through these functions, the FLN thus appears as a local organisation and not just as a clandestine military body based on the principles of revolutionary parties.

Partitioning and clandestinity were, moreover, more theoretical than real: at all levels, the FLN retained the imprint of an Algerian society where allegiances were based on family and community ties; locally, the organisation into cells, groups, sections and even *kasmas*[22] was based on places of residence. Very often, a cell would comprise four or five people who shared a room, and the leaders, up to *kasma* level (300 to 350 contributors), lived in the same hotel or the same street as their subordinates. Residents of hostels and shanty towns also knew the faces of the local leaders of what was an organization that, through its desire to emerge as a credible opposition power, had to rely on senior members who were known to their "constituents". Partitioning thus only began to be effective at the sector level (i.e. three or four *kasmas*). Local police sometimes succeeded in identifying these "middle managers" of the FLN, but did not generally know who the "regional head" (responsible for three or four sectors), who was domiciled in the Seine *département* (and thus outside their jurisdiction). Indeed, it would seem that, despite dozens of arrests of "*kasma* chiefs", the FLN was rarely disrupted by police action. The FLN knew how to take full advantage of the human resources available in a town where Algerian immigration was long established and lived largely in the margins of the town, without really bothering the public authorities until 1957. In this way, the local council, as well as urban development and settlement policies, were directly involved at the very heart of the police's battle against Algerian independence fighters.

Ultimately, the radicalisation of the Algerian conflict highlighted the limits of a policy that essentially consisted of pushing the "North African problem"[23] into the urban margins (slums and shanty towns) and residential margins (certain hotels and lodging houses, almost entirely dedicated to the Algerian population). The fact remained that the dispersion of Algerians in the town also worried the police, because the near invisibility of this group of the "North African population", especially those living far from the identified "medina",[24] made control and monitoring operations difficult. It is at this point that the police's approach converged with those of other actors (architects, social workers, civil servants, etc.) who were interested in improving Algerians' lives

[20] The FLN "brothers" called upon by an Algerian from Houilles (west of Argenteuil) who wished to divorce without having to pay compensation to her husband issued the following response: "Go and see the husband and tell him to divorce her without a fuss and let her marry who (*sic*) she wants". Letter seized from an FLN leader in Sannois (east of Argenteuil), August 1959, AD 78 1W 507.

[21] Interview with Saad Abssi (head of the FLN's Argenteuil region in 1958), Gennevilliers, 3 October 2007.

[22] Theoretically, a cell comprised four militants and a leader; a group comprised four cells; four groups formed a section; and four sections made up a *kasma*. Above this level, there were sectors, regions, zones and super-zones. However, this pyramid arrangement often did not correspond to the realities of FLN structures on the ground.

[23] From 1946 onwards, this expression had become something of a leitmotif in police and administrative reports relating to the Algerian presence in mainland France.

[24] In the north and east of France – as well as, for example, in the Loire *département* (around Saint-Étienne in east-central France) – many Algerians lived in "workers' camps", in which they were practically confined as a result of workplace monitoring, police repression and the hostility of the local population (Michel 1956).

and hoping that state intervention would make it possible to build new collective residences (the Sonacotral hostels) that would break with the self-organisation found in the existing accommodation for Algerians (Bernardot 2008; Hmed 2006). In Argenteuil, as elsewhere, this policy neither resolved the issue of housing for North African migrants nor weakened the FLN, but did have consequences that would extend far beyond the end of the Algerian War of Independence.

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Further reading:

Emmanuel Blanchard's latest work: *La police parisienne et les Algériens, 1944–1962* (published by Nouveau Monde, 2011).

To quote this article:

Emmanuel Blanchard & translated by Oliver Waine, "The police and the 'Algerian medinas' in France. Argenteuil, 1957–1962", *Metropolitics*, 7 March 2012. URL: http://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-police-and-the-Algerian.html.