

## Examples of psychological torture and its physical effects on female detainees in Tifelfel Women's Prison in the Aurès region from 1955 to 1962

Djemaa Benzeroual<sup>1</sup>, Boudjemaa Akram<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Modern and Contemporary History, University of Banta 01(Algeria)

<sup>2</sup>Modern and Contemporary History, University of Banta 01, Laboratory of Studies in History, Culture and Society (Algeria)

The Author's E-mail: [djemaa.benzeroual@univ-batna.dz](mailto:djemaa.benzeroual@univ-batna.dz)<sup>1</sup>, [Akram.Boudjemaa@Univ-Batna.Dz](mailto:Akram.Boudjemaa@Univ-Batna.Dz)<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract:

This research paper examines the methods of psychological and physical torture by the French colonial authorities on women detainees in French prisons during the Algerian Revolution from 1954 to 1962. The study focuses on the female detainees at the Tifelfel women's prison in the Aurès region, which was the first prison for women in Algeria during the liberation revolution, established in 1955 and dedicated to the wives of the freedom fighters.

Key points addressed in our study include:

- Studying excerpts from testimonies of female detainees with their children at Tifelfel prison, detailing the circumstances and reasons for their imprisonment, their daily life inside the prison, and the physical and psychological torture methods they were subjected to.
- Analyzing some testimonies of female detainees at Tifelfel women's prison such as the testimonies of Zahra Obeid Allah, Shamkha Bint Rahmoun, and Jumaa Suleimani, among more than twenty incarcerated women, highlighting the methods of psychological and physical torture.
- Highlighting the simple rural women's suffering and their endurance of the responsibility for the revolution alongside their male counterparts for the liberation of their homeland.

**Keywords:** female prisoners, Tifelfel prison, Algerian Revolution, psychological torture, physical abuse, and threats.

### Introduction :

In this study, we address the psychological torture of Algerian women detainees during the Algerian War of Independence from 1954 to 1962 by the French occupation forces. Our research relies on testimonies from female prisoners at the Tifelfel women's prison in Ghassira<sup>1</sup>, in the Aurès<sup>2</sup> Mountains, during the period of 1955 to 1962.

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<sup>1</sup>Gacirah: The municipality of Gacirah is located in the Batna province in the Aurès region of Algeria. It consists of several villages, including the following important ones: Tifelfel, Massouda, Ouled Bouakaz, Tahamamet, Ouled Helal, Ouled Edir, Ouled Abid, Tabalit, Haiza (Sharfa), Ouled Fateh, Ouled Wriach, Ghoufi, Ouled Maimoun, and Kaf Larouss.

<sup>2</sup>The Aurès: The Aurès Mountains are located in the Saharan Atlas range in eastern Algeria, with peaks reaching over 1800 meters in height. One of the most important mountain ranges in the Aurès is the Chelia Mountains, which is home to the highest peak in northern Algeria, Mount Koukou. Mount Koukou's height is estimated at 2328 meters. Other notable peaks include the Mahmel Mountains with peaks reaching 2321 meters, the Ahmar Khaddou Mountains at 1975 meters, the Bouaref Mountains at 1646 meters, and Mount Azrou at 2172 meters. The region also includes the highlands of Anoghishn and Aris. These mountains overlook the city of Timgad to the north and the

The main problem posed in this research consists of several key questions, including:

- What were the conditions and circumstances of the female detainees at Tifelfel women's prison?
- What are the methods and techniques of psychological torture and their effects on the female detainees?

After the outbreak of the Algerian War of Independence from 1954 to 1962, women's activism and struggle expanded, spanning both urban and rural areas. The Aurès region was among the first areas in Algeria where the liberation revolution erupted.

The French colonial authorities considered the Aurès region a restricted area and implemented several exceptional laws, such as the State of Emergency Law issued on April 3, 1955. They also issued several decrees, like the decree of September 26, 1955, which established specialized administrative centers in rural areas known as "SAS."

The Aurès region was one of the first areas in Algeria where these institutions were established. These were quasi-military organizations operating within the framework of social, psychological, and intelligence work for the specialized French army tasked with pacifying villages and rural areas<sup>3</sup>.

These institutions were essential tools in the war effort, aimed at census-taking of all residents to control the number of suspects and innocents. Among the areas in the Aurès where these French military centers were established was the village of Tifelfel in Ghassira, where a center for specialized administrative services was created alongside the Tifelfel women's prison<sup>4</sup>.

#### **1-Causes and Circumstances for the Establishment of Tifelfel Women's Prison 1955-1962:**

The Tifelfel women's prison is considered the first of its kind in the history of the Algerian revolution. It was established by France for the wives of the revolutionary Mujahideen who were among the first to ignite the revolution in the southern Aurès region. The purpose was to prevent these women from communicating with their husbands and to use them as leverage to threaten the revolutionaries along with their wives and children. Due to the intense military operations carried out by the Mujahideen, the prison was founded in August 1955 by the French army. It consisted of a small enclosed area with rooms where the wives of the Mujahideen were placed along with their children from various villages in the Ghassira region<sup>5</sup>.

Some of the first female prisoners in this prison during the years 1955/1956 included:

- Dahiya Oubed Allah, the wife of Mujahid Mekhlouf Oubed Allah, and their young daughter Zakiya, who was three years old.
- Jumaa Slimani, the wife of Moussa Slimani.

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regions of Sidi Okba, Kheneg Sidi Naji, and Zeribet El Oued to the south. The inhabitants of the Aurès region are believed to have origins from the Gétules and the Libyans.

<sup>3</sup>Les archives d'outre mer – aix-en provence- Boit n° 6SAS<sub>15</sub>→Construction des S.A.S. 1956.1962. Medina –Teniêt, Tifelfel et Tikout.

<sup>4</sup>Rashid Zoubir, French Colonial Crimes in the Fourth Province (1956-1962), Dar Al-Hikma, Algeria, 2010.p41-43.

<sup>5</sup>Omar Tablait, The Role of Guezzira in the Liberation Revolution, Part One, Ma'arif Printing Press, Annaba, Algeria, 2008.p143

- Fatima Belaïche, the wife of Ali Ben El-Hadj Ben Jdid and their two children, Fatima (four years old) and Mohamed (two years old)<sup>6</sup>.
- Fatima Zeghdoud, the wife of Ben Si Amar El-Taieb.
- Fatima Ben Zroual, the wife of Othman Ben Amar.
- Hamama Ben Zroual, the wife of Amar Ben El-Sadek Ben Jdid.
- Aisha Miftah, the wife of Abdel Salam Miftah, along with her daughters Huda and Fatima<sup>7</sup>.
- The wife of Sabti and Zani Ben El-Taib.
- The wife of Ibrahim Ben El-Ajmi.
- The wife of Khedri Mohamed Amzian.
- The wife of Yahya Ahmed.
- The wife of Khedri Amar Ben Agoul.
- The wife of Hashemi Mazyani.
- The wife of Mohamed Salih Ben Salem<sup>8</sup>.

## 2-Examples of Testimonies from Detained Women:

In our field study, we relied on the testimonies of some detainees as a model for this research through the oral narratives provided by some female prisoners through direct, recorded, and visual encounters. Among the most important of these testimonies that we were able to encounter are:

### - Testimony of the detainee Zohra Obeid Allah:

Mrs. Zohra Obeid Allah is considered one of the first female detainees to be thrown into the Tifalal women's prison, which she entered after its opening in August 1955. Regarding her arrest, she said, "...In late summer 1955, a group of the French army attacked my house located in the village of Kaf Al-Arous in Gassira, and forcibly took me and my young daughter Zakia to the village of Tifalal where we were put in prison with a large group of women, around forty women. Our only crime was that we were the wives of revolutionary fighters against the French occupation, and my age at that time was between 14 and 15 years."<sup>9</sup>

Zohra describes the living conditions inside the prison as: "The prison consisted of a small enclosed yard and several rooms where women and children were not allowed to leave, under strict guard by the French army and foreign intelligence forces. Visits by our families, who used to supply us with food rations consisting of wheat flour, barley, dates, were prohibited. The village's council distributed the provisions among the detained women. We cooked in groups in the prison yard and were provided drinking water through a tank placed in the yard. We were not allowed to contact our families during the detention period."

<sup>6</sup>Belkacem Zroual, *Knights on the Front Lines: Pages from the Journey of Jihad in the Aurès and the Desert, Dar Al-Aurassia*, 2012.p14

<sup>7</sup>Testimony with detainee Zahbia Obeidallah, on March 13, 2015, from 10 AM to 12 PM in the city of Batna.

<sup>8</sup>Omar Tablit, a previous source, p. 134-135.

<sup>9</sup>Zohbia Obeid Allah: Born in the village of Ghoufi in Gacirah, she married her cousin Obeid Allah Mekhlouf, who is considered one of the instigators of the Algerian revolution in the Aurès region. He participated with the rebels in the bombing operation on the night of November 1, 1954, in the city of Biskra by cutting off the road and electricity wires leading to Biskra, and placing a bomb near a hotel where French recruits were staying, which exploded among a group of them. Zohbia Obeid Allah was arrested because she was the wife of one of the revolutionaries and was imprisoned in Tifalal Women's Prison for more than a year.

She also talks about the revolutionaries' stance on the arrest of the wives of the fighters: "...When the National Liberation Army fighters heard about the arrest of some women and children from the Gassira region, the region's leader, the fighter Mohamed Ben Messaoud Belqasmi, along with his deputy, the fighter Ali Ben Jdid, and the fighter Mekhlouf Obeid Allah, whose wives and children were arrested by France, decided to launch an attack in October after the Maghrib prayer on the specialized administrative affairs center in Tifalal. The outcome of this attack was the killing of two French officers, one of them a lieutenant, and thirteen soldiers while lowering the French flag in the evening. However, the women could not escape from the prison due to the age of their children."

Regarding the French forces' reaction to this attack, Zohra Obeid Allah says: "...The French army's reaction on the same night after the operation was to call for military reinforcements from the intelligence and foreign forces from the Tikout and Aris regions and to attack the women's prison with knives and weapons like rifles, aiming to avenge themselves on the revolutionaries by slaughtering their children. They found over twelve children, so they decided in the end to place a bomb above the women's room and detonated it in the middle of the night, destroying the room with a large group of women and their children. The losses were significant and included:

- The martyrdom of Fatima Belaish, the wife of the fighter Ali Ben Jdid, and their sons, Fatima and Muhammad Ben Jdid.
- The martyrdom of Miftah Aisha, the daughter of Omar, and her two daughters, Miftah Huda and Miftah Fatima.
- The martyrdom of Yamina and Zani, the daughters of Sabti.
- The martyrdom of Rukaya Sayeghi, the daughter of Ali Ben Ammar, and they were buried collectively by burying them in a pit.

In response to the attack, the French army burned the homes and residences of the fighters like the house of Ali Ben Jdid and the houses of Belqasmi Ubukar and Belqasmi Ahmed and Tayyib... They uprooted the palm trees belonging to the family of Belqasmi Muhammad Ben Messaoud, the leader of the attack, and his deputy Ali Ben Jdid, and the trees of the family of Ammar Ben Jdid Ben Sadiq... They looted the women's jewelry made of silver and some livestock from some residents of Tifalal."

Zohra Obeid Allah recalls about the detained women, "After the room fell, the women were transferred to another prison where we stayed until October 1956."<sup>10</sup>

- **Testimony of Detainee Jumaa Suleimani:**

Detainee Jumaa Suleimani, born in the village of Kaf La'rous in Gassira, married her cousin, the mujahid Mousa Suleimani. She was arrested from her home in Kaf La'rous and placed in the Tifalal women's prison in late summer 1955 due to her husband's involvement in the Algerian Liberation Revolution. The witness describes the conditions of her life inside the detention center, saying, "We were subjected to beatings, torture, and threats with knives. I spent two years in detention without being allowed to contact our families. We faced the worst forms of humiliation, psychological, and physical torture."<sup>11</sup>

- **Testimony of the Distinguished Detainee Ben Rahmoun:**

<sup>10</sup>Testimony with detainee Zahbia Obeidallah, on March 13, 2015, from 10 AM to 12 PM in the city of Batna.

<sup>11</sup>Testimony with detainee Jumaa Slimani on December 20, 2015 in Guezzira, from 9 AM to 11 AM.

The distinguished Ben Rahmoun is the wife of the mujahid Mohammed Ben Rahmoun. She was imprisoned in the Tifalal prison for two years from 1956 to 1958. She recounts in her testimony about her life in the detention center, "The prison accommodated around 300 women, the wives of mujahideen who were subjected to forced residence in the prison from five in the morning until seven in the morning. The women would return to their homes in the morning to take care of household affairs such as cooking, farming, and tending to the animals... In the evening, they would go back to the detention center. Every night at ten o'clock, French officers would come to count the number of women present in the prison. We slept on piles of straw and some worn-out blankets, and our lives were very difficult in the detention center."<sup>12</sup>

### **3-Physical and Psychological Effects on Female Detainees:**

According to the testimonies of the captive women, the years spent by these women in detention left several physical and psychological effects on their lives, with their pains persisting to the present day due to the suffering they experienced in detention, which can be divided as follows:

#### **- Physical Effects:**

The detained women were subjected to beatings and rape by the French army and foreign legion soldiers. Witness Fatima Zeghdoudi recalls in her account of her life in detention, "I entered the detention center with my young son, and we were subjected to physical beatings and threats with weapons. I sustained several wounds on one of my feet, which I still suffer from the effects of, causing me to walk and move slowly."<sup>13</sup>

Detainee Zahbia Obeidallah mentions in her testimony, "I was beaten in the detention center by the activist, and after the bomb explosion, I was injured along with my daughter Zakia. I was pulled out of the rubble that fell on my shoulder, as I was wounded on the back, shoulder, and thigh, with the scars still prominent as bruises. My three-year-old daughter Zakia was wounded in her head and continued to suffer from the effects of her wounds until her death."<sup>14</sup>

Regarding cases of rape suffered by female detainees in the Tifalal prison in the period of 1955/1956, witness Zahbia Obeidallah recalls, "Women are raped every night by foreign legion soldiers, selecting a group of women who do not have young children and taking them to secluded places. As for women with children, they beat and prick their children to prevent soldiers from approaching them and to create attention and chaos in the prison. There was a detainee who was abducted from the prison by a responsible officer, transferred to the center, she was Mrs. Atria Yakhlef, the wife of the mujahid Bashir Tablit, who remained captive in the center with the French from the summer of 1956 until the end of the year 1959. Due to complaints from female detainees about assaults by some soldiers on the mujahideen's women and in cooperation with the families of the detainees, French army officers decided to place guards from the civilian population in the detention center to guard the women. These guards were Zerwal Sadiq, Hindawi Ramadan, and two women, Aljia Othmani and Mansoura Zerwal. This decision stopped the soldiers' assaults on the captive women."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Recorded footage about the women's Tifalal prison during the Liberation Revolution, produced by the National Center for Research in the National Movement and the Liberation Revolution, directed by Kamal Ghadban, 2015.

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<sup>14</sup>Testimony with detainee Zahbia Obeidallah, on March 13, 2015, from 10 AM to 12 PM in the city of Batna.

<sup>15</sup>Omar Tablit, a previous source, p. 137-142.

- **Psychological Effects:**

Discussing the psychological effects resulting from physical torture and rape of female detainees in the Tifalal prison is not easy due to the absence of specialized field studies and archival documents, and the reluctance of most women to testify about the conditions they experienced in this detention center due to the sensitivity of the subject, especially for conservative rural women, and because of customs and traditions that prevent disclosure of such actions.

Through our review of testimonies of some female detainees, we note that a large percentage of them have been psychologically affected by the assaults and torture they experienced in the detention center.

For example, detainee Jumaa Slimani mentioned in her testimony, "When I remember the years of imprisonment in Tifalal prison, I tremble with fear and cry, and I cannot carry out my daily household chores. At times, nightmares haunt me, and when I drive near the Tifalal area, I close my eyes so as not to see this village because it reminds me of the harsh years of detention..."<sup>16</sup>

Regarding her years of captivity, Fatima Zeghdoudi recalls in her testimony, "I still suffer from several psychological effects due to the detention, such as constant fear of the night and fear of the light of the lamp because it reminds me of the attacks by the French recruits and foreign legionnaires on the detainees every night to intimidate and assault them with threats and beatings."<sup>17</sup>

In the testimony of Zahbia Obeidallah, who spoke about the psychological effects, she says, "When I remember the period of detention, sudden bouts of palpitations, muscle stiffness, tremors, and other types of physical and psychological effects overwhelm me."<sup>18</sup>

- **Conclusion:**

The study focuses on analyzing the experiences of female detainees in the Tifelfel Women's Prison in the Aurès, which was the first prison for women in Algeria during the Algerian Liberation Revolution. Founded in 1955, Tifelfel Women's Prison was designated for the detention of freedom fighters' wives.

The aim of the study was to explore and document the violations and mistreatment these women endured during their period of incarceration, including the psychological and physical torture inflicted by the French colonial authorities. This research seeks to highlight the dark aspects of colonial history and shed light on the challenging experiences that women went through during this critical period in Algerian history.

- **Appendices:**

<sup>16</sup>Testimony with detainee Jumaa Slimani on December 20, 2015 in Guezzira, from 9 AM to 11 AM.

<sup>17</sup>Recorded footage about the women's Tifelfel prison during the Liberation Revolution, produced by the National Center for Research in the National Movement and the Liberation Revolution, directed by Kamal Ghadban, 2015.

<sup>18</sup>Testimony with detainee Zahbia Obeidallah, on March 13, 2015, from 10 AM to 12 PM in the city of Batna.



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**- Testimonies and Interviews:**

- Testimony with detainee Zahbia Obeidallah, on March 13, 2015, from 10 AM to 12 PM in the city of Batna.

- Testimony with detainee Jumaa Slimani on December 20, 2015 in Guezzira, from 9 AM to 11 AM.

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