



Algeria's Foreign Policy in the Post-Hirak Era

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

State of Affairs

After a decade of diplomatic and foreign policy quasi paralysis under the presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the new post-Hirak leadership under Abdelmadjid Tebboune has launched an all-out foreign policy to make Algeria's diplomacy more dynamic and proactive with the objective of enabling Algeria to regain its influence both regionally and globally.

Regaining Influence

The Russia-Ukraine war has presented new opportunities for Algeria's foreign policy thanks to its energy resources. Domestic reforms and wealth accumulation should help Algeria regain its influence in foreign affairs. Taking the lead in African affairs should be the top priority as should joining powerful groupings such as the BRICS.

Foreign Policy Priorities

The main focus is on the immediate neighborhood, particularly Libya and the Sahel which are in a state of severe crisis. The reawakening of Algeria's foreign policy has been met by many challenges: foreign interference in Libya has hindered Algeria's mediation diplomacy, while in the Sahel executing the Algiers Accords has proved difficult. Meanwhile, the Moroccan-Israeli alliance has resulted in a near-war situation.

Foreign Policy Actions

The main aim of the foreign policy is to counter the Moroccan-Israeli alliance. To accomplish this, improvement in relations with Egypt and the GCC, not least the rest of the Arab world, has become critical. Maintaining good relations with the great powers and other states while preserving the tenets of Algeria's foreign policy are the main drivers of the new foreign policy.

KEYWORDS

#Algeria

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COVER IMAGE: Naples, Italy—May 27, 2022: The president of Algeria, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, departing from Naples, arrives at the Capodichino airport for the military honors, together with the Italian president.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2019, the Hirak, a nationwide peaceful movement, called for the removal of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The military hierarchy forced him to resign thus preventing him from running for a fifth term. Elected in November 2019, the new President, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, was determined to revamp Algeria's diplomacy; this was evident in his inaugural speech on December 19, 2019.¹ One of the top priorities mentioned by Tebboune was neighboring Libya. He also reiterated Algeria's support for national liberation movements and the right to self-determination for Palestinians and the Sahrawis. The new authorities in Algiers meanwhile complained that Algeria's foreign policy had suffered in the last decade.² Tebboune declared, in February 2020, that Algeria's foreign policy would be "dynamic and proactive" and that this would secure the country's status as a "regional power."³ This explains the all-out diplomacy that began soon after Tebboune came to power.

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This brief examines the main issues that the new leadership in Algiers has set as its priorities and how it has addressed them. The underlying thesis is that Tebboune's leadership aims to overcome the immobility that characterized Algeria's foreign policy and diplomacy during the last two terms of Bouteflika's presidency and for Algerian foreign policy to regain its *golden age* (1962–1978).⁴ The government seeks to do so while remaining true to the principles that Algerian foreign policy has maintained since the inception of the nationalist movement in the 1930s:⁵ national sovereignty, support for national liberation movements and

the right to self-determination, noninterference in other nations' domestic affairs, nonalignment,⁶ opposition to foreign military bases, military blocs, and alliances, and peaceful resolution of conflicts.⁷

SECURING THE MAGHREB & SAHELIAN NEIGHBORHOODS: ALGERIA AS A MEDIATOR

The Maghreb and the Sahel are of utmost importance to Algeria; its three priorities being the conflict in Libya, tense relations with Morocco, and stabilization of the Sahel—particularly Mali.

Libya: Algeria's Fear of Spillover and Partition

Feeling marginalized on the Libyan front, Algeria vowed that it would reject its "exclusion from the proposed solutions to Libya because it is the most concerned with the stability of the neighboring country displeases some."⁸ The objective has been to assist in the reconciliation between Libyan forces, to reject the interference of all foreign forces, and to preserve Libya's sovereignty. Algeria's neutrality in the complex conflict between the Libyan parties and its potential role as a mediator led numerous states (Italy, Egypt, Turkey, Germany) to rely on its involvement to bring peace and stability to Libya, which resulted in Algeria's participation in the January 19, 2020 international Berlin Conference on Libya.⁹ In pursuit of the Conference's objectives, the Algerian government has taken many initiatives, such as close cooperation with Tunisia. The Libyan, Tunisian, and Algerian foreign ministers have met on numerous occasions, in hopes of achieving a consensual political solution.¹⁰

The protraction of the crisis in Libya, which shares a long border with Algeria, and the presence of transnational terrorist organizations threaten Algeria's national security and energy interests in the south of the country.¹¹ But attempts by Algiers to resolve the crisis peacefully have stumbled against players such as Egypt, its main rival in the region, the UAE, France, and, to a lesser degree, Russia,¹² which supported Khalifa Haftar in the

east, while Turkey supported the government in the west. To achieve its objectives, Algeria has recalled its Libya experts who had been forced into retirement after 2015.¹³ It has also revived its traditional links with powerful Libyan tribes.¹⁴ Algeria's great expertise in mediation means it could play a major role in reconciling rivaling Libyan factions. In line with this, it could also call on support from Moscow and Ankara with which it has excellent relations.

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Relations with Morocco: The Impossible Entente

In his inaugural speech, Tebboune insisted that “the Arab Maghreb [...] is one of our concerns and we will support cooperation and friendly relations with neighboring countries.” However, tensions with Morocco over Western Sahara and other issues such as trade and security, for instance, remained serious impediments to a revival of the Arab Maghreb Union. As far as the new leadership was concerned, Bouteflika had neglected the question of Western Sahara by “instructing officials not to respond to any Moroccan hostile actions.”¹⁵ Thus, the appointment in September 2021 of a special envoy, Amar Belani, dedicated to the Western Sahara and the Maghreb,¹⁶ reiterated the importance that the politico-military establishment places on Western Sahara as a top priority for Algeria's foreign policy. Belani, who served as ambassador to the EU, responds instantly, through the media, to what Algiers sees as Moroccan provocations.

Algerian-Moroccan relations went from bad to worse: first, after a Moroccan attack in November

2020 on Sahrawi demonstrators in El-Guergarat, the buffer zone in the south of Western Sahara.¹⁷ A month later, former President Donald Trump announced U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara as a trade-off for Morocco normalizing relations with Israel.¹⁸ Military and intelligence cooperation between Morocco and Israel is perceived in Algiers as a threat to Algeria's national security. However, Algiers' threshold of tolerance against alleged Moroccan “hostile acts” came in mid-July 2021 when Morocco's ambassador to the UN distributed a note expressing support for the secessionist Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylia (MAK), listed as a terrorist organization by Algiers.¹⁹

Another hostile act in the eyes of Algeria was a vast spying scandal revealed by a consortium of international newspapers and human rights organizations. They found that Morocco had targeted more than 6,000 Algerians, including many senior political and military officials. This resulted in Algeria breaking diplomatic relations with Morocco in August 2021.²⁰ Fears of a military confrontation were real.²¹ As pointed out, “the warming ties between Morocco and Israel bring this polarizing regional power into the delicate Maghreb power balance for the first time.”²² Due to increasing Moroccan-Israeli military cooperation, Algeria fears that it is targeted because of its refusal to normalize relations with Israel, its close ties to Russia and China, and its unconditional support to the Palestinian and Sahrawi causes.

Mediating Peace in the Sahel: Implementing the Algiers Accords in Mali

Algeria's renewed presence on the African continent reflects the importance of the continent to Algeria's foreign policy,²³ with the Sahel being the top priority.²⁴ In Mali, Algeria endeavored to help resolve the crisis, offering its expertise to negotiate peace agreements between Bamako and the various opposition groups. Algiers continues to mediate and ensure the implementation of the Bamako agreement

signed in April 2015.²⁵ During his visit to Bamako in August 2021,²⁶ the Algerian foreign minister, Ramtane Lamamra, an expert on African affairs who had served as Commissioner for Peace and Security at the African Union, reaffirmed Algeria's commitment to the implementation of the peace and reconciliation agreement in Mali, through continued dialogue with all parties.

The peace agreement brokered by Algeria constitutes the optimal framework for consolidating a return to lasting stability in Mali. Fearing further destabilization due to tensions between France and Mali, Algeria has sought to mediate a reconciliation between both sides.²⁷ The issue of the Tuareg and their possible attempt at secession is of great concern for Algeria, which also boasts a Tuareg population. Algerian authorities fear a domino effect from Mali and Niger could destabilize Algeria.²⁸

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In the Sahel, in addition to its major role in the war against terrorism, Algeria's regional, political, and economic activism is visible through the revival of the trans-Saharan gas pipeline project, which aims to export gas from Nigeria to Europe via Algeria. In February 2022, Algeria, Niger, and Nigeria signed the Niamey Declaration for the resumption of the 4,128-kilometer trans-Saharan gas pipeline project, which will link Nigeria to Algeria, via Niger.²⁹ In July 2022, the three ministers of energy signed a memorandum of understanding to concretize the trans-Saharan gas pipeline project (TSGP).³⁰ When completed, it could deliver 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually to European markets via Algeria and would supply inland stations along its route.

For now, no indication has been given as to when this project will be completed. The pipeline will eventually allow Europe to diversify its gas supply in the wake of the energy crisis caused by the Ukrainian-Russian war while creating vital revenue streams for these African gas markets.³¹

THE ARAB LEAGUE & ARABIAN PENINSULA

Civil society, the media, and former officials have called on Algeria to leave the League of Arab States (LAS),³² viewed as inept, particularly within the context of normalization between some Arab countries and Israel, the perceived betrayal of Palestinians, and the League's powerlessness in standing up to the West's interventions in Arab states (Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen). However, Algiers believed that it was time for an Arab summit that would prioritize the Palestinian question.³³ The challenge was to gather all Arab leaders at the Summit, overcome their differences, and develop common positions.³⁴

Consequently, the Algerian president and his foreign minister toured the region to convince Arab states to participate in the summit scheduled for November 1–2, 2022. For the Algerian government, this summit would be yet another opportunity to further anchor its return to the Afro-Arab world. But, the five-way Egypt-led Arab summit, held in August 2022, in New Alamein³⁵ that brought together Egypt, the UAE, Iraq, Jordan, and Bahrain, might have been perceived as an attempt to derail the November Arab Summit by Algiers.

In the Gulf region, Algeria has sought to improve bilateral relations at the political and economic levels, with some success, particularly with Qatar. In February 2022, Tebboune made a two-day state visit to Doha, where he attended the 6th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF).³⁶ The objective of the visit was to convince Doha to attend the Arab summit in Algiers and to intensify economic cooperation. To that end, Algiers has been able to attract Qatari investment in tourism and steel projects.³⁷

A month earlier, Kuwait's foreign minister declared that Kuwait would attend the summit.³⁸ Importantly, while in Kuwait, Tebboune declared that "Algeria would always defend the Gulf countries."³⁹ In 2020, Tebboune traveled to Saudi Arabia.⁴⁰ Clearly, Algeria seeks to establish good relations with the Gulf to offset the support the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) provides to Morocco,⁴¹ and to attract much-needed direct foreign investment. However, unlike Algeria, whose ties with the GCC are limited,⁴² Morocco receives 40 percent of its foreign investment from the GCC.⁴³ Trade between Algeria and the GCC in 2019 amounted to \$1.7 billion.⁴⁴

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ALGERIA AND ITS EUROPEAN NEIGHBORS

Policymakers determined to disrupt the status quo, that prevailed under Bouteflika, rose to power in the post-Hirak era. The shifting and resolute policy resulted in two major crises with France and Spain, respectively.

In October 2021, Algiers recalled its ambassador to Paris, Mohamed Antar Daoud, in reaction to comments by French President Emmanuel Macron who said that Algeria, after its independence in 1962, had been built on “a memory rent” maintained by “the political-military system.”⁴⁵ The reaction of the authorities in Algiers was unwavering. They felt that this was an insult to Algerians, especially his questioning whether there was “an Algerian nation before French colonization?”⁴⁶ Given the importance of Franco-Algerian relations, a return to normalcy eventually set in after Macron's re-election in April 2022. Macron's three-day visit to Algeria, on August 25

through 27, 2022, dispelled some contentious issues.⁴⁷ However, the question of memory might reemerge and cause yet another crisis.

The second ongoing crisis is with Spain, whose socialist government reneged on Spain's neutrality in the conflict in Western Sahara, siding with Morocco to the detriment of the Sahrawis.⁴⁸ Before the crisis, Algeria and Spain had excellent relations supported by the 2002 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Good Neighborliness. Spain's sudden change of position—in violation of international legality—resulted in Algeria recalling its ambassador to Madrid, Saïd Moussi, suspending the Treaty of Friendship, and blocking commercial transactions, except for the export of natural gas.⁴⁹

Although Italy has always had excellent relations with Algeria, Algerian-Italian relations benefitted further from the recent Algero-Spanish row. Thus, in July 2022, the two countries signed 15 agreements and memorandums of understanding during the 4th Algerian-Italian Intergovernmental Summit.⁵⁰ The agreements cover a wide range of sectors, including the pharmaceutical industry, higher education, renewable energies, etc.⁵¹ With the war in Ukraine and Russian gas disruption, Algeria has taken on greater importance for Italy, while Algeria's expectations are that Italy will invest in Algeria's energy sector and other economic fields.

ALGERIA AND THE GREAT POWERS

To ensure the effectiveness of its foreign policy, Algeria has had to balance its relations with the United States, its partner in the fight against terrorism,⁵² China, its main trading partner,⁵³ and Russia, its main arms' supplier.⁵⁴ In April 2022, Tebboune reasserted Algeria's nonalignment, emphasizing that this does not mean being friends with everyone.⁵⁵

The United States: The Fallout of the Abraham Accords

Algeria and the United States have both a Strategic Dialogue and a joint Military Dialogue which

Secretary Anthony Blinken reiterated in Algiers in March 2022.⁵⁶

However, Algeria's foreign policy has often been at loggerheads with U.S. foreign policy (Vietnam, Iraq, Palestine, Western Sahara, Syria, Libya, among others).⁵⁷ Since 2019, Algiers has become increasingly apprehensive of U.S. policy towards Algeria. The United States successively opposed the appointment of two former Algerian foreign ministers to serve as UN Special Envoy to Libya—Ramtane Lamamra⁵⁸ and Sabry Boukadoum,⁵⁹ respectively. These rejections bewildered Algerians.

But the most devastating blow to U.S.-Algerian relations is undoubtedly Trump's recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over occupied Western Sahara,⁶⁰ which has not been rescinded by the Biden administration, despite the United States' paradoxical support for the UN process. Viewed from Algiers, the presence of Israel in Morocco, coupled with Spain's volte-face on Western Sahara, signifies that the United States seeks to indirectly

and trade spheres.⁶³ In 2019, the total trade volume between China and Algeria surpassed \$9 billion with China remaining the country's leading supplier, representing 18.25% of Algeria's imports.⁶⁴ Despite the pandemic, the total trade volume between China and Algeria remained at around \$9 billion in 2020. Algeria and China share many common foreign policy features, such as noninterference in others' domestic affairs, South-South development, and nonalignment. However, geopolitical realities caused by the Abraham Accords and the Moroccan-Israeli military and intelligence cooperation have created a new political and military dynamic. China is gradually acquiring a large share of Algeria's arms market due to Algeria's continued diversification of its arms procurement. Algeria has acquired sophisticated Chinese weapons, like the CM-302 (YJ-12B) coastal defense supersonic missile in its land-to-sea version. This is plausibly a way of hedging China, which Algeria could rely on in case of military conflict with a Morocco backed by the United States and Israel.⁶⁵

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pressure Algeria to normalize relations with Israel. As noted, “Algiers views some of the Trump and Biden administrations' policies to be harmful to Algeria's vital interests and those of the greater Middle East and North Africa.”⁶¹ Algiers has reacted mildly to this development and the United States has sought to soothe its fears. Yet, Algiers' deep concern that a Moroccan-Israeli alliance⁶² would result in shifting the regional balance of power will inevitably strengthen Sino-Algerian and Russo-Algerian relations.

Sino-Algerian Relations: Trade But Not Just...

Sino-Algerian relations have intensified since the 2000s with remarkable strides in the economic

Algeria's unequivocal support for China was confirmed with Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan on August 2, 2022.⁶⁶ Algeria reiterated its adherence to the one-China principle and hoped that the U.S. would abide by the three China-U.S. Joint Communiqués⁶⁷ and end its meddling in China's internal affairs.⁶⁸

Russia and Algeria: Neutrality on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict while Strengthening Ties

Since Algeria's independence, Russo-Algerian relations have been strong and developed beyond the military domain.⁶⁹ In Fall 2021, the two militaries conducted anti-terrorist drills in Russia's southwestern city of Ossetia.⁷⁰ On September 1–7, 2022, Algerian land armed forces participated in the strategic command and staff exercise “East-2022” in Russia, along with 13 other nations.⁷¹ In November 2022, Algerian and Russian paratroopers will hold anti-terrorist tactical military exercises in Hammaguir near Bechar in southwest Algeria.⁷²

Regarding the Russia-Ukraine war, Algeria, which has maintained good relations with both countries, adopted a neutral position, advancing its “commitment to peace and the search for a negotiated solution.”⁷³ In April, Algeria voted against the resolution at the UNGA calling for Russia’s exclusion from the UN Human Rights Council,⁷⁴ reiterating its permanent attachment to the rules and fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and the various international laws and charters.

Favorable to a negotiated solution, Algeria is part of the Arab Contact Group composed of the foreign ministers of Jordan, Sudan, Iraq, and Egypt, in addition to the Secretary General of the Arab League, which launched consultations with the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers in Moscow and Poland, respectively.⁷⁵ Although Algeria insisted that sovereignty and territorial integrity of states should be observed, it also emphasized that the “legitimate security concerns of the parties concerned should be accommodated.”⁷⁶ During his visit to Algiers in May 2022, Sergei Lavrov, who came to Algeria to reinforce cooperation between the two countries and to upgrade the strategic partnership signed in 2001, expressed his appreciation for Algeria’s balanced position in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

Since 2019, Algerian foreign policy has been intensely active to surmount the paralysis that characterized it in the last decade of Bouteflika’s presidency. In an attempt to restore the *golden age* of Algeria’s foreign policy while keeping its main principles, Algiers seeks to demonstrate that it has diplomatic and economic roles to play both regionally and on the world stage.

Regional dynamics have forced Algeria to address domestic issues, strengthen its defense policy,

and pursue an all-out foreign policy. The Russia-Ukraine war has empowered Algeria in the realm of energy as Europe seeks to reduce its dependency on Russia and have Algeria as one of the main natural gas suppliers. The Moroccan-Israeli military cooperation will remain the main preoccupation of Algeria’s foreign policy and the most salient threat to its national security, especially with Morocco’s decision to allow the construction of Israeli bases on its soil.⁷⁸ This will inevitably result in closer rapprochement with its traditional partners, China and Russia.

Algeria will also continue its all-out diplomacy to signify its role as a middle power in the region to protect its interests, especially along its long

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borders. While balancing its relations with the great powers, Algeria will play its traditional mediation role⁷⁹ in several conflicts, but also seek to strengthen relations with the Gulf states to ward off alliances. Algeria’s interest in integration with the BRICS,⁸⁰ the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, could help it regain the place it had once occupied on the world stage.

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