

Algeria: Preventing Chaos

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The fall of Gaddafi in 2011 and the ensuing conflict worried Algeria considerably even if Algerian-Libyan relations were often tense due to Gaddafi's impulsive policies. Indeed, despite periods of amity and political affinities Gaddafi's Libya represented an intermittent threat to Algeria's security. His foreign policy caused great concern to Algerian decision makers throughout his reign, regardless of the often trumpeted friendly and brotherly ties of the two neighbours (e.g. when Libya stood with Algeria in 1971 when Algeria nationalized its hydrocarbons resources or the signing of the Arab Maghreb Union in 1989). There are several examples that stand out over Gaddafi's 42 years in power. His manipulation of the Tuareg question (calling for a unified Tuareg state, for instance), the inconsistency of his regional policy (interventions in Africa), his alliance with regimes in conflict with Algeria (e.g. when he signed the Oujda Treaty with Rabat in 1984, thus reneging on his support for the Algerian-backed POLISARIO, the Sahrawi liberation movement), the non-ratification of the border demarcation with Algeria, his obsession with unions of all kinds, the creation of the Sahelo-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) in February 1998 without associating Algeria, his use of terrorism and his military adventures, and his confrontation with the United States created serious frictions with Algeria.¹ In the 1990s, Algerian officials were convinced that Gaddafi was supporting Islamist insurgents operating in Algeria.² The West's rehabilitation of the Gaddafi regime (2003-2011) accentuated tensions between Algeria and Libya as they became rivals in the energy market; indeed, Libya wanted to replace Algeria as the main supplier of natural gas to Europe.³ Of course, there were also periods of rapprochement. In 1987, for instance when the two countries contemplated entering a political union.

During the 2011 revolution, despite misgivings about Gaddafi, Algerian decision-makers opposed military intervention by foreign forces, particularly NATO's Operation Unified Protector. Algerian policymakers were apprehensive that, because Libya had weak institutions, a marginalized military,⁴ and personalized power, the intervention would result in chaos and thus affect Algeria's national security.⁵ Despite what the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) believed at the time, Algeria did not

¹ See, Yahia H. Zoubir, "Tilting the Balance toward Intra-Maghreb Unity in Light of the Arab Spring," *International Spectator*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (September 2012), p. 92.

² Author's interview with high-level advisor on national security, March 5, 1993.

³ Yahia H. Zoubir and Louisa Dris-Aït-Hamadouche. *Global Security Watch—The Maghreb: Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO Press, 2013), 73.

⁴ Ibrahim, Sharqieh, "Reconstructing Libya: Stability Through National Reconciliation," *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, No. 9, December 2013, p. 4.

⁵ Author's interviews with officials in Algiers, September 22, 2018.

support the Gaddafi regime during the revolution. It sought a political solution through an African Union led mediation. Algeria had opposed Western intervention, not so much out of sympathy for Gaddafi, but out of realism, fearing that the collapse of the regime through military intervention, without a political solution, would lead to chaos in Libya and a destabilization of the Sahel. This proved to be the case⁶.

Following the revolution in 2011, Algeria's main concerns were in regards to security. Algiers was concerned about the emergence of Salafi-Jihadist groups becoming armed with sophisticated weapons; officials were also worried about the influx of refugees into neighbouring countries, the potential destabilization of Tunisia through arms flows from neighbouring Libya, as well as northern Mali with the return of the armed Tuareg who had served in the ranks of the Gaddafi regime.⁷ In addition, in the absence of a regular military force to control Libya's border with Algeria, Algiers feared an increase in Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) terrorist attacks along the Algerian-Libyan border - which eventually occurred in 2013 when terrorist groups who had travelled from Libya attacked Algeria's gas plant in Tinguentourine. By 2014 these fears would be exacerbated. The institutional divisions and existence of two rival governments in Libya concerned Algerian policymakers who believed that such conditions favored the rise of jihadist groups linked to AQIM and later the presence of the Islamic State (Daesh). The absence of a coherent Libyan state, the existence of various rival armed groups, and the return of foreign powers have raised great concern in Algiers, especially since 2014 with the emergence of Khalifa Haftar about whom Algerians have great reservations seeing him as a proxy for foreign powers whose interests are antithetical to the region and Algeria in particular.⁸ Not only that; with support from his international backers, Haftar has undermined Algeria's years of diplomatic mediation. Indeed, Haftar represents a serious problem for Algeria's policy toward Libya. Not only is his alignment and close proximity with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and France, but also his propensity for conflict which has short-circuited Algeria's mediation efforts and attempts to deescalate the situation in Libya since 2015. Haftar's stretching of the term terrorist to target the UN appointed Government National Accord (GNA) and his hostility towards the Muslim Brotherhood, close to the GNA in Tripoli, contrasts with Algeria's constructive dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood, whom Algiers had engaged amongst a range of actors in Libya in order to broker reconciliation in Libya.

Algeria takes the threat of terrorist groups seriously, and this conflation by Haftar's camp has exacerbated Libya's problem. There is a prevalent belief in Algiers that whilst Salafi-Jihadist groups have been defeated, they have not been destroyed. The greatest concerns relate to the South and West of Libya where jihadist groups have retreated to pockets of territory in preparation for attacks beyond Libya's borders. Algeria's security forces have reasons to be concerned because the attacks against

⁶ A senior US official told the author in late 2011 that the Algerians were right; they had predicted that a violent overthrow of the regime in Libya would result in chaos. See, Yahia H. Zoubir, "The Libya Spawn, What the Dictator's Demise Unleashed in the Middle East," July 2012, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137796/yahia-h-zoubir/qaddafis-spawn>

⁷ Yahia H. Zoubir, "The Libya Spawn, What the Dictator's Demise Unleashed in the Middle East," July 2012, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137796/yahia-h-zoubir/qaddafis-spawn>

⁸ Author's interviews with Algerian officials, Algiers, 2016.

the Tinguentourine (in Amenas) gas plant in January 2013 were planned in and carried out from Libya. Algerian authorities fear similar attacks but also terrorist groups settling in the Algerian desert to conduct attacks against various targets or kidnappings as had happened in the early 2000s. Furthermore, while arms trafficking from Libya has diminished considerably, it has not stopped; thus, the porous nature of the border has compelled Algeria to spend enormous resources (troops, sophisticated surveillance equipment) to protect its more than 900-kilometer border with Libya from terrorists and smuggling of all kinds.

Foreign Policy

The quasi-civil war experience in Algeria during the bloody 1990s decade has had a major impact on Algerian policymakers. Based on that experience, Algiers has advocated vis-à-vis the Libyan crisis, an inclusive dialogue involving all factions and especially the Muslim Brotherhood, whom General Haftar, like the UAE and Egypt, consider a terrorist organization. The external support he has received from foreign powers has dissuaded Haftar from making concessions or accepting a political solution, as he has often shown disdain for political processes since 2015.⁹ It is precisely this impediment to the political solution advocated by Algiers that has created tensions between Haftar and Algerian decision-makers. For Algeria, "Haftar is only one actor among others,"¹⁰ and is therefore not considered as the key actor in the resolution of the Libyan crisis. For Algiers, military interference from France, Egypt and the UAE since 2015 have been a real hindrance to Algeria's policy towards Libya. Algeria has pursued, unsuccessfully, precisely because of those foreign interferences, a strategy of stabilizing Libya by urging Libyans to resort to national reconciliation, akin to the Algerian experience in the late 1990s, to end the civil war and return to state-building. The basic doctrinal principle of Algeria's foreign policy is that conflicts in the Middle East and Africa (and elsewhere) must be resolved peacefully and in which Algeria can play a mediation role as it has done since its independence in 1962.¹¹ Indeed, Algeria has mediated numerous conflicts, e.g. Mali, Iran-Iraq, U.S.-Iran, Ethiopia-Eritrea, including the hosting of the UN peace process in 2015 that established the GNA. Algeria wishes to see the reconstruction of a strong and stable Libya, which it would view as beneficial since it would lighten the burden of Algeria's military spending in the defense of its borders in the east and south-east to ward off the numerous trafficking of all kinds.¹²

⁹ Tarek Megerisi. "Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia. Neighboring States - Diverging Approaches." In Karim Mezran and Arturo Varvelli. Editors. *Foreign Actors in Libya's Crisis* (Washington, DC & Milan: Atlantic Council & ISPI, 2017), p. 26.

¹⁰ Author's telephone interview with an Algerian senior official based in Algiers, 25 September 2018

¹¹ Yahia H. Zoubir, "The Giant Afraid of Its Shadow": Algeria, the Reluctant Middle Power," in, Adham Saouli, Editor, *Unfulfilled Aspirations: Middle Power Politics in the Middle East*, Hurst Press (2020), pp. 67-90.

¹² For more details, see, Yahia H. Zoubir and Djallil Lounnas, "L'Algérie face à l'arc des menaces en Libye et au Mali : Quelle stratégie ?" [Algeria facing the arc of threats in Libya and Mali: What strategy?] *The Maghreb Review*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2019, pp. 58-90.



Libyan Prime Minister Fayez Serraj and former Algerian Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia

Since Libya's April 2019 conflict, Algeria has undergone a severe political and economic crisis,¹³ which resulted in the removal of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. A new President, Abdelmadjid Tebboune was elected in December 2019; he is cognisant of the necessity of helping resolve the Libyan conflict as a matter of national security.¹⁴ Algeria participated in the Berlin Conference on Libya on the 20th of January 2020. Soon afterwards, its Foreign Minister Sabri Boukadoum traveled to eastern Libya, but was unable to meet with Haftar. While Algeria has adopted a neutral position, each official meeting with one or the other Libyan rivals resulted in strains with both. The new diplomatic initiatives regarding Libya provided more visibility and legitimacy for the new president but domestically these initiatives were also meant to warn the population about the seriousness of the threat at Algeria's borders.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, since the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, Libya has represented major security challenges for Algeria. The various terrorist attacks emanating from Libya (and Mali), added to the instability in the Sahel in general, and, since December 2020, the resumption of hostilities between Morocco and the Polisario Front, have compelled Algeria to play a leading role in the resolution of the conflict in Libya. The current shifts in alliances, such as the normalization of relations between Israel and

¹³ Yahia H. Zoubir, "The Algerian Crisis: Origins and Prospects for a 'Second Republic.'" 21 May 2019. <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2019/05/algerian-crisis-origins-prospects-republic-190520100257161.html>

¹⁴ Alia Brahimi and Akram Kharief, "Why Algeria is suddenly more interested in Libya," 6 March 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/why-algeria-is-suddenly-more-intersted-in-libya/>

Arab states, particularly with Morocco have forced Algeria to reassess its alliances. Being one of the most pro-Palestinian states in the MENA, Algeria sees itself as the target of the Arab states that normalized relations with Israel. The presence of the UAE in Libya and its support for Morocco in seeking annexation of the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara has raised considerable concerns in the political-security establishment. There is pressure from public opinion to leave the Arab League, perceived as an instrument of the Gulf states in imposing their policies in the North African region. Algerian policymakers are reconsidering their external relations, but will not make drastic changes until they know whether the U.S. Administration under Joe Biden will rescind Donald Trump's decision to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara. They are also watching closely whether Washington will play an active role in resolving the Libyan crisis. If the Joe Biden administration chooses to play such a role, Algeria may offer its good offices. In the meantime, Algeria has operated important changes in the internal structures of its intelligence services and diplomacy, which had been weakened under the previous regime and prevented Algeria from playing a more assertive role in the resolution of the Libyan crisis.

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