

## UPDATING ALGERIA'S MILITARY DOCTRINE

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**T**he attitudes of modern Algeria can only be understood by examining its history: its 132-year colonisation by France, its bloody war of liberation against French occupiers, and its reluctance since then to align with any major bloc.

After it gained independence in 1962, Algeria enjoyed immense prestige – second only to Vietnam in the Third-Worldist historiography of sacrifice – because the National Liberation Front (FLN) had won the propaganda and diplomatic war against France even while its poorly armed and ill-trained guerrillas had been defeated in the field. Algeria had frustrated one of the world's major military powers and some powerful people in France, to this day, have not recovered from the humiliation. The film *The Battle of Algiers* defines, for many, the little they know about that struggle. Those fighting for Algeria's independence invented modern guerrilla warfare – the word asymmetrical so fashionable in military and security jargon today was invented, in part, in the streets of the old city of Algiers in 1956.

Since independence in July 1962, power in Algeria is best described as resting on a tripod consisting of the army, the security forces and the system once built around the ruling FLN, a party which never acquired an ideology or an organisation comparable to its equivalent in the USSR. To that was added, after its creation in 1964, the powerful oil and gas monopoly, Sonatrach, and an internationally highly-respected diplomatic service, which played the role of the exquisite velvet glove concealing a hand of steel.

In the two decades which followed independence, Algeria played a leading role in calling for a new world order. French intellectuals rallied to the cause. It is difficult to recreate the atmosphere of the Algiers of those years, let alone understand the particular place Algeria held in the Non-Aligned Movement led by President Tito of Yugoslavia and Prime Minister Nehru of India.

## Historical context (1954 to 1979) matters

Historical context is essential in understanding the relations Algeria maintains with Russia, its neighbours and major Western powers. In 1962, two years before independence, Nikita Khrushchev explained to General de Gaulle that he favoured Algeria remaining in the French sphere of influence after independence rather than falling into the American one. As the FLN and its more powerful twin, the Armée de Libération Nationale (ALN) sought weapons and diplomatic support in their fight against France after 1954, they did not find much solace in the ex-USSR. The latter only recognised the Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne (GPRA) in October 1960. The only weapons the USSR ever delivered to the ALN were four helicopters in spare parts to an ALN camp in western Morocco in March 1962. Bear in mind that Algeria was then part of France, and therefore part of NATO. Nelson Mandela visited that same camp, unknown to South Africa's secret service, BOSS, that very same month.

The KGB for its part had a different view of the matter. It trained many officers of the MALG (ministère de l'Armement et des Liaisons générales / ministry of Armaments and General Liaisons, the embryo military security unit within the ALN that was in charge of buying weapons. Its boss, Abdelhafidh Boussouf would emerge as one of the most important actors in Algeria after 1962. The "Boussouf boys" as they were nicknamed included Kasdi Merbah, who ran the much feared Sécurité Militaire (SM) from 1962 to 1979 and ensured Chadli Benjedid became president and not the then minister of foreign affairs, Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The latter never forgave the SM or its successor, the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS). The first promotion of Algerian officers trained by the KGB, known as *Le Tapis Rouge* dates from 1960. Some are still active and the spirit of the KGB still haunts the DRS academy. The KGB did score a goal when they tried to accredit the US with being behind the *putsch des généraux* which in April 1961 tried to topple General de Gaulle. The head of the CIA, John Foster Dulles personally disowned the truth of such an allegation.

Yugoslavia, Egypt and China were more forthcoming in providing weapons for the ALN throughout the fight for independence. The German secret services meanwhile turned a blind eye to Algerian purchases of weapons in West Germany, against the wishes of their government. This they believed would provide the newly minted Federal Republic of Germany with good leverage over France. The FLN set up shop in London but was forced to close it as a result of French pressure on the UK government. The independent reporting of the BBC World Service in Arabic was much appreciated by Algerian nationalists and helped give that service its *lettres de noblesse*. The British government did not apparently interfere. Many senior North Africans still listen to the Arabic service of the BBC every morning.

After 1962, Algeria's SM and the KGB cooperated closely. But these links never translated into an alliance. In the decade after 1967 the USSR tried and failed to convince Algeria to let it use the immense naval base at Mers el Kebir in western Algeria and station Soviet troops on its territory.

After Colonel Houari Boumedienne ousted Ben Bella in 1965, Algerian diplomacy became more markedly non-aligned. Support for the African National Congress (ANC) and training guerrillas to fight against Portugal

in Angola and Mozambique became a hallmark of the country's foreign policy. Strong support to build up the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) came to symbolise the young republic which also gave considerable help to the Polisario Front which fought to stop Morocco from gaining control of the former Spanish colony of the Western Sahara after the colonial power walked out in 1975. That conflict pitted Morocco against Algeria and froze relations between the two countries. Whereas most Algerians have always identified with the Palestinians, they never showed as much enthusiasm for the West Saharan refugees and the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic based around Tindouf in south-western Algeria.

## **Algeria diversifies its source of weapons (1985 to 2016)**

A five-year thaw in the mid-1980s initiated by President Chadli Bendjedid allowed the Algeria-Morocco border to open and the Maghreb-Europe gas pipeline which carries Algerian gas to Spain and Portugal to be built. The project was strongly supported by Ronald Reagan, who warned the EEC (later the EU) against depending too much on supplies of gas from Russia – to little avail. France in particular argued that Algeria was not a more reliable supplier of gas than the USSR.

Relations with the USA meanwhile were developing as American companies played a key role, along with their British and later Japanese counterparts, in developing the country's oil and gas resources after independence. The first ever gas liquefaction plant in the world was built by Shell and started operations in 1964, with the first ever shipments of LNG going to Canvey Island in the Thames estuary. The development of hydrocarbons and other sectors of the country's ambitious development plans were funded from domestic savings, but Western banks and large Exim or Coface-backed guarantees played an important role. The bulk of Algeria's foreign trade, exports of hydrocarbons and imports of machines and foodstuffs was conducted with Western nations where most of the country's postgraduate students went to study.

The 1970s and 80s were the halcyon days of a diplomatic role which saw Algeria oust the apartheid regime of South Africa from the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 and introduce the Palestine Liberation Organisation to it the following year. In 1975, Algeria brought Saddam Hussein and the Shah of Iran to the negotiating table and helped broker an agreement on the Shatt al-Arab dispute. Algeria successfully negotiated the release of the US hostages in Tehran in January 1981. Algeria's diplomats also occasionally suffered for their country's leading role in such mediation. The foreign minister, Mohamed Seddik Benyahia, was literally "shot out of the air" by an Iraqi missile as he was travelling between Istanbul and Tehran on May 3rd 1982 in an attempt to bring Iran and Iraq to the negotiating table. Saddam Hussein apologised in private to the Algerian president, Chadli Bendjedid, arguing that it was a mistake. Taleb Ibrahimi who took over from Benyahia is convinced the Iraqi knew what he was doing.

In diplomatic terms, however, Algeria remained neutral. With former socialist allies such as Serbia it remained on good terms. It supported Serbia throughout the war which tore the former Yugoslavia apart – payback for the days when Tito had given weapons to the ALN. Algeria

considered Serbia to be the nucleus of the region. It refused to grant Kosovo recognition as an independent state in 1999.

The other sacred cow of Algerian diplomacy is an absolute refusal to get involved in the internal affairs of sovereign countries: this explains its silence when every other Arab Muslim country was condemning Russia's war in Chechnya. Algeria has always sought to be an intermediary. In 2016, it refused to break off relations with North Korea after the latter made a nuclear test, despite strong pressure from the USA and South Korea. North and South Korea are represented in Algiers, where the government has excellent relations with both. On March 27th 2014, Algeria abstained in the UN General Assembly vote rejecting Russia's annexation of Crimea and tried to maintain a neutral position between Moscow and Kiev.

As it has diversified the source of its weapons purchases, the Armée Nationale Populaire (ANP), successor of the ALN, has recognised the need to have its officers trained in France, the UK, Germany and the USA. By the late 1980s, after years of negotiations with France, Russia and the US, the ANP opted to buy American air defence equipment and radars. During the civil war in the 1990s, pitting Islamists against the regime, the West put an embargo on the sale of weapons to Algeria. Meanwhile Algerian security succeeded in stemming the flow of medium-size weapons which was coming in from the Balkans through the mafia in Naples. For a decade Algeria learnt to use civilian equipment for military purposes and developed links with China and South Africa – with the latter it is building a drone.

In 2007, Algeria converted its \$7bn debt with Russia into an arms purchase of similar value. Algeria thus remains the only Arab country today to deploy S300 anti-aircraft missiles and own the latest generation of fighters from Russia, the Su30. After India, Algeria is the largest purchaser of Russia weapons and the largest overall purchaser of weapons on the continent. It is the 10<sup>th</sup> largest arms purchaser in the world and after its \$10bn purchase of German tanks in 2012 it became that country's largest export market for weapons. Today, however, after the halving of the price of oil, Algeria will have to rationalise its military expenditure more than ever before. Fighter aircraft air defence systems are traditionally bought from Russia (\$15bn-worth over the past decade). Germany has emerged as a provider with a contract to buy frigates and transfer the production of optical communications and armoured vehicles to Algeria. China has supplied C28A corvettes and Italy has delivered Agusta Westland helicopters.

## Conditions to frame a new defence doctrine

The difficulties Algeria faces in articulating a defence strategy for a world whose post-1945 security structure, inherited from the Cold War, is coming apart, can be examined through two prisms.

The first is the different sensibilities that exist in the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité and the army high command. The second is that the architecture of power in Algeria needs to be reorganised to meet the requirements of modern warfare – security, economic and cyber. These challenges cannot be met so long as the military refuse to allow the middle classes to partake in the debate on the country's future.

Diplomacy is back in the limelight today but, despite the quality of its diplomats, has less shine than thirty years ago. The oil and gas company and the ministry of energy, for their part, were weakened in 2010 by the dismissal of the powerful minister of energy of the 2000s, Chakib Khelil. Allegations of corruption have clung to him and some of the vice presidents of Sonatrach ever since. These difference branches of power need rearranging. A number of powerful private groups have arisen which are challenging the status quo.

So the Algerian government showers subsidies on consumers when the price of oil is high and makes unexpected and deep cuts when it falls. The Jurassic Park nature of the country's banking system is a major handicap. Until the military accept that bold economic reforms to modernise the Algerian economy will strengthen the economy, the weak performance of the non-oil sector, the cronyism which too often characterises those private sector entrepreneurs who are close to the rulers, the flight of capital, and the difficulty creating real jobs in industry will continue apace. Despite the economic and political reforms led by two military officers, President Chadli Bendjedid and Prime Minister Mouloud Hamrouche (1989-1991), the officers finally put a stop to them, using the emergence of the Islamic Salvation Front to scare the middle classes into supporting a repressive policy which provoked a civil war that claimed more than 100,000 victims. Arab rulers across the Middle East have used similar strategies with the same disastrous consequences. An economy which continues to be a victim of the oil curse does not offer a solid bedrock for domestic stability, a bold foreign policy or greater influence in the north-west African region.

The second point is whether or not to update the doctrine which proclaims that Algeria does not allow its military to intervene abroad: this "doctrine" was honoured in the breach when Houari Boumedienne sent troops to Egypt to defend the Nasser regime in 1967 and again in 1973. Algerian troops helped to protect Western Saharans who fled advancing Moroccan troops in the Western Sahara – then legally a Spanish colony – in the winter of 1975–1976. Algerian troops and security have intervened in Tunisia since 2011, in full agreement with Tunisian political and military leaders, to combat radical Islamic groups. Sophisticated Algerian weapons the Tunisian army did not have, such as attack helicopters, have operated in Tunisia. The Algerians were much quicker off the mark to help Tunisia after the fall of Ben Ali than either the EU or the USA.

Algerian troops have also intervened in Mali and in Libya to protect Algeria's borders. Special Forces directly intervened in Libya, awash with weapons since the fall of the Gaddafi regime, after the jihadi attack on the gas field of Tigentourine at In Amenas, close to the border, four years ago. Defending Algerian oil and gas fields justifies whatever operations the country's leaders deem necessary.

Yet Algeria remains reluctant to send troops abroad because of its fear of them being turned into auxiliaries of a major power. President Abdul-Aziz Bouteflika's physical absence from the political scene, a consequence of his ill health, makes Algeria even more reluctant. No one in Algeria today can take a decision of such importance. The chief of staff of the Armée Nationale Populaire has the role of a manager and has no legal or political obligation to render any account to the people through a parliament whose two chambers (Chamber of Deputies and Senate) are little more

than echo chambers. The chief of staff has never publicly outlined a strategy or policy framework on defence. One can only conclude that non-intervention abroad is a fig leaf which hides the inertia that prevails in the top echelons of power in Algeria today.

The DRS and the army high command disagree markedly in their attitudes toward foreigners. The Algerian army has always been reluctant to engage in any form of joint military exercise that might suggest its idea or *modus operandi* is being challenged. This lack of accountability goes hand in hand with a fierce nationalism which simply brooks no debate on ideas, weapons, and tactics with members of other armed forces. As more and more Algerian officers are trained abroad to handle weapons bought in the US, Germany and Italy, it is difficult to see how the senior brass can resist for much longer exchanging ideas with their peers abroad, be they in the West, China or Russia.

The DRS for its part has for decades been involved in the Middle East and beyond. Its forerunner, the SM, was frequently involved in trying to sort out hijacking crises in the 1970s and 1980s. It helped the US in its fight against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan thanks to Algerians fighting for Bin Laden and in Lebanon where the DRS has worked with the DGSE (Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure), the CIA and Mossad to solve hostage crises. This history has led to a culture of exchange which stands in marked contrast to the army. The crisis, which in September 2015 led to the powerful head of the DRS for twenty years, General Tewfik Mediène, being dismissed by the head of state, has not affected this broader culture.

Algeria's institutions need to be recast if the country is to be in a position in the future to fully assume the role of an important regional power. The ministry of defence since Abdelaziz Bouteflika became president in 1999 has been in his hands. Breaking with tradition he has held the post of minister himself. He has opposed appointing even a military officer to run it, as was the custom before. The best option would be to appoint a civilian but that seems unlikely. Whoever is appointed needs to enjoy a minimum of stability. Parliament and its various commissions, notably of foreign affairs and defence, need to be given real teeth – this poses the question of accountability. Parliamentary commissions need to be able to vet strategies presented by the government. The army, the DRS and the politicians must each play their role and have their powers defined more clearly. The army and the DRS should be kept apart.

These reforms will not necessary turn Algeria into a Western-style democracy nor need that be their aim. They are necessary to ensure clear lines of responsibility and allow Algeria to both project its power and influence more effectively. Whatever the quality of the DRS, the army or the country's diplomacy, a major effort at clarifying Algeria's strategic aims seems imperative for what is the largest country in Africa. Algerian leaders need to engage more with foreign partners and explain to 40m Algerians what the country's regional strategy is. This will ensure greater transparency and overall stability.