

# Algeria's Role in Libya

Ferhat Polat



(Amru Salahuddin - Anadolu Agency)

**This policy outlook explores some of the critical elements driving Algeria's foreign policy concerning the on-going conflict in Libya. Despite the existence of a panoply of national security threats at its borders, ranging from the abundance of weapons, the presence of terrorist groups, and the interference of regional rivals, Algiers seems to be favouring the mediation route, expressing its willingness to facilitate dialogue between the Libyan protagonists. While the civil war is threatening to create a spill over effect into the Algerian territory, several factors appear to neuter Algeria's will for an all-out intervention. This policy outlook examines these multi-layered considerations and provides insight into some of the complex dynamics at play.**

## Introduction

Algeria has suffered a great deal in the aftermath of Muammar Gaddafi's overthrow. Libya's vast desert border, populated by communities with a long history of smuggling, presents a significant challenge to Libya's neighbours. The abundance of weapons and ammunition following the 2011 war, and the ability of non-state actors to move and operate freely, have increased threat levels in the region. Algeria initially [opposed](#) the NATO intervention of 2011 and called on the African Union to push for a diplomatic solution to Libya's conflict.

Algiers' historical experience under the French colonial era profoundly informs the Algerian view on non-interference in the affairs of foreign countries. "The principles of national sovereignty, non-intervention, diplomatic resolution of conflicts, and Arab solidarity are still important to the Algerian regime, even if they seem to matter less and less to others in the region", Dr Jacob Mundy, Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at Colgate University, told TRT World Research Centre.

Algeria is deeply concerned by the lack of state-control in Libya and the rise of terrorism and smuggling cartels in fear that these phenomena could destabilise Algeria itself. Therefore, the Algerian government is committed to pursuing a long-term road map for stabilising Libya by encouraging Libyans to use diplomacy to end the civil war and return to state-building.

Algeria's current Libyan policy consists of working with various groups in order to help stabilise the country. Thus, Algiers has supported UN-backed inclusive initiatives, including the Government of National Accord (GNA), as a solution to the conflict. The Algerian authorities appear to believe that Haftar is incapable of bringing stability to Libya. Therefore, Algeria plays a vital role in the search for a political solution to the Libyan crisis. Recently, Libyan Prime Minister Sarraj met with Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune to discuss the conflict in Libya. During the meeting, Tebboune called Tripoli "[a red line no one should cross](#)". Algeria has adopted the principle of finding a political solution to protect the unity of the Libyan people and the territorial integrity of the country.

## What are Algeria's Priorities in Libya

Libya continues to suffer from the interlinked political and economic crises, which have weakened state institutions by damaging its economy. As a result, rival militia groups, particularly in the East of Libya, continue to compete for power. The weak surroundings of the state allowed these armed groups to sustain their activities through illegal sales of oil.

For instance, Trans-Saharan smuggling routes have evolved from passageways for the informal trade of illicit goods to conduits for the smuggling of weapons, drugs, fuel, counterfeit cigarettes, and even people. The criminal activities and corruption associated with trafficking undermine domestic stability in Libya.

Algeria is concerned about a chain reaction from Libya. Both countries share a 1,000 kilometre-long border. Therefore, insecurity in Libya can quickly spread to Algeria, and Algiers is particularly worried about the potential infiltration of terrorist groups, such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda.

In 2013, Algeria was the scene of a major terror attack which targeted [the Tigantourine gas facility near Ain Amenas](#) in the desert region. During the raid, the attackers took captive about 150 Algerians and dozens of foreigners. The assailants also killed more than 40 staff, most of them foreigners. Reportedly, Khalid Abu Abbas, aka Mukhtar Belmukhtar, was the leader of this operation. He is originally Algerian and is the leader of an organisation called "Those who sign with blood", which is affiliated with the Sahara-based terrorist organisation Al-Mourabitoun. The latter has pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda and claimed responsibility for the attack.

These groups have a long track record of waging terror in the region. Al-Mourabitoun, in particular, has strong ties with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). During the Ain Amenas attack, these terrorists [began their journey in northern Mali](#) and travelled through Niger. They then stopped in Libya, north of Ghat, where they assembled with other perpetrators. Subsequently, they launched the cross-border attack into Algerian territory. Algerian officials concluded that most of the weapons used by the militants in this attack were from Gaddafi's stockpiles.

The death of 40 people prompted the Algerian government to take a more robust approach to protect its frontier from Libya's spreading instability. As a result, Algeria has begun to [tighten its border with Libya](#) by deploying thirty to forty thousand troops, tanks, armoured vehicles, and air support.

Moreover, Algeria faces another consequence of the political instability next door, namely a refugee influx. Such a refugee flow would include not just Libyans but also Sub-Saharan Africans and radical infiltrators. In this context, Algeria has been [spending \\$500 million on securing its Libyan border](#), and this figure has recently increased following the escalation of the conflict with more foreign intervention.

"Since the start of the revolution against Muammar Gadhafi, Algeria has been deeply affected by the instability in Libya. The Ain Amenas attack in January 2013 confirmed how Libya's instability is considered a security issue for the authorities in Algiers. Moreover, the worsening crisis in Libya and Mali represented the breeding ground for the



establishment in Algeria's neighbourhood of powerful terrorist groups, which are considered a formidable threat to the entire region" Umberto Profazio, the Maghreb Analyst at NATO foundation, told TRT World Research Centre.

According to Professor Mundy, "Algeria's main concern is border security, namely the spillover effect from the Libyan civil war, and the possibility of extremist groups using the Algerian territory for their insurgency. Algeria was engulfed in a civil conflict throughout the 1990s, and the ruling elites are determined not to see this situation repeating again. The 2012 crisis in northern Mali and the 2013 crisis in Ain Amenas (Algeria) revealed to the Algerian government that their worst fears had come true. In essence, terrorists from Libya and elsewhere had taken advantage of the collapse of the Gaddafi regime to attack other countries in the Maghreb and in the Sahel".

In addition, for Professor Mundy, "the Ain Amenas attack was particularly important because it was the first time Saharan terror groups had targeted Algerian oil and gas production infrastructure in a significant way. There is also on-going armed activity along the Algerian-Tunisian border that further reinforces Algerian authorities sense of growing insecurity along their frontiers. Algeria is also uncomfortable with growing European and American counter-terrorism and anti-migration activities in the Sahel, which they view as further external encroachment into their sphere of influence".



President of Algeria Abdelmadjid Tebboune, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres pose for a photo during the Berlin Conference on Libya, Germany on January 19, 2020. (Murat Kula- Anadolu Agency)

## Algiers' Diplomacy in Libya

Algiers has been among the key supporters of the UN-backed Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) concluded in Skhirat, Morocco, in late 2015. The former minister for Maghreb, Arab and African affairs in Algeria, Abdelkader Messahel, [stated](#) that only Libyans could build their country's future, stressing the point that Libyans have to

resolve the crisis themselves and have to do so by communicating with each other.

A wide range of Libyan representatives, including members of the HoR and GNC, as well as prominent public figures from Libyan political parties and civil society, attended the signing. The resulting political agreement led to the establishment of a single Government of National Accord (GNA), led by Fayez al-Sarraj. The Algerians have henceforth supported UN-backed inclusive compromises such as the GNA as the way out of the conflict.

Following a popular uprising against the incapacitated former President [Abdelaziz Bouteflika](#), Algeria, once a powerhouse of international diplomacy, has retreated from both regional and international arenas.

"From January 2019 Algeria has adopted a passive stance towards the crisis in Libya, allowing Haftar's offensive in southern Libya. This phase mainly coincided with the internal turmoil in Algeria. However, since the swearing-in of President Abdelmajid Tebboune, the new government has shown increasing attention to the Libyan crisis. The Algiers conference in January 2020 has been a sign of the renewed diplomatic activism of the new authorities, concerned about the proxy war and the expanding influence of new players in the Libyan arena", asserted Profazio in an interview with the author.

The drastically escalating Libyan conflict is posing a great danger to Algeria. Hence, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has wasted no time since his [inauguration](#) in December to take the country out of its diplomatic hibernation to contain the increasing threat to its border security.

"Algiers is taking a larger and active role, particularly following the election of the new President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, whose foreign policy doctrine is: pre-emption and action. This would create a new vision of its military dimension to bridge it to national security imperatives and new foreign policy objectives. Political stability is vital for the country's national security, which could be an indicator in this case through the mechanism of democracy. In a post-ex-president Bouteflika transition, requirements from the new President's administration include military and diplomatic resources to protect the southern provinces, and to provide developments and create jobs, not just protect gas and oil production plants and facilities", Abdenour Toumi, Researcher at the Ankara-based think tank ORSAM, told TRT World Research Centre.

According to Toumi, "the latest developments on the Libyan dossier is making Algiers more active, such as the meetings series of Algeria's foreign affairs minister, Mr Sabri Boukadoum, with the LNA as with GNA members in Algiers, Benghazi and Tripoli, preceded by the meeting of Algeria's President with Libyan Prime Minister Saraj in January in Algiers. All these signs lead to let one feel that

Algiers wants to find a political solution in Libya, despite all the endogenous and extraneous factors that are standing in the way of any peace talks process. Algiers' initiative, which was planned in February 2020 for the main Libyan belligerents to meet in Algiers, was postponed because of the Coronavirus. Thus, Algeria's ties to tribal chiefs and Islamist leaders in Libya, and close cooperation with the new political leaders in Tunisia, would also enhance its position for direct talks".

After years of apathy, the new government in Algiers has adopted a more assertive policy towards the war in neighbouring Libya. Algiers seems to be willing to play a more pronounced role in terms of facilitating dialogue between Libyan rival groups as the on-going Libyan conflict is seen as posing a severe threat to its national security.

For Profazio, "there are also important political and geopolitical aspects to be underlined. The fact that the uprising against Gadhafi led to a state of civil war in Libya has been portrayed by the Algerian regime as evidence of the negative consequences of the Arab Spring, a narrative reinforced following the start of the opposition movement known as 'Hirak' early in 2019. Likely, the regime will not allow the Hirak to go any further, instrumentally using the Libyan case as a reference to indicate the chaos that a revolution would bring".

Libyan Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj [met](#) with Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune Algerian president to discuss the conflict in Libya. During the meeting, Tebboune called Tripoli the aforementioned 'red line', after forces loyal to warlord Haftar [reportedly](#) shelled a military academy in January this year, killing 30 people. Algeria has adopted the principle of finding a political solution to protect the unity of the Libyan people and the territorial integrity of the country.

Algeria was invited by Germany to participate in the Berlin Conference on Libya to find a political solution to the Libyan crisis, which has been seen as a positive development since all relevant actors should be on the negotiation table to contribute to reaching a permanent agreement. The conference ended with a [55-point communique calling for a permanent ceasefire](#), the implementation of a UN arms embargo, the dismantling of militias, and the resumption of the political process, all under the auspices of the UN Support Mission in Libya. However, many Libyans have very low expectations that these talks will lead to any sort of long-lasting peace on the ground in the coming days. Case in point, soon after the conference Haftar's militias relaunched [a fresh offensive on the Libyan capital](#).

Following the Berlin peace conference, Algeria [hosted](#) foreign ministers from Chad, Egypt, Mali, Niger, Sudan, and Tunisia's chief diplomats in Algiers to discuss plans for resolving Libya's conflict.

Germany's foreign minister also attended the meeting. Indeed, Algeria apparently maintains good contacts with all sides in Libya.

"Algeria would like to remain neutral as long as they can. Increasingly, Algeria is finding itself the lone voice of non-intervention in the Arab world. From Tunisia to the UAE, everyone seems to have their hands in the Libyan crisis. Algerian leaders are thus faced with a dilemma: they want to influence the course of events in Libya in a constructive way but don't want to get sucked into a proxy war with their neighbours. Algeria has good relations with all the other parties involved — Turkey, Qatar, Egypt, the UAE, etc. So it is a difficult balancing act for Algiers", asserted Dr. Mundy.

Several other foreign leaders and foreign ministers from Arab and European states and Turkey have all visited Algeria in the last few weeks to discuss the Libyan crisis. Recently, at the [invitation](#) of Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [visited](#) Algeria for talks on the conflict in neighbouring Libya and to discuss plans to boost trade links. President Erdogan was the [first](#) foreign head of state to undertake an official visit to Algeria since the December 12 election of Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune.



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R) meets with Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune (L) during the Berlin Conference on Libya, Germany on January 19, 2020. (Turkish Presidency/Murat Cetinmuhurdar/Handout Anadolu Agency)

"The renewed diplomatic activism of Algeria comes after, and is an answer to, months of isolation due to pressing domestic issues. In this new phase, the Libya policy of the new authorities in Algiers is fluctuating, having lost its previous predictability anchored to the traditional support to the GNA. The visit of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Algiers in January seemed to suggest that Algeria was drawn in Turkey's gravitational pull to defend the government of Fayeze al-Sarraj and oppose Haftar's advance on Tripoli. However, the Algerian Foreign Minister Sabri Boukadoum's early February visit to Benghazi to meet with Haftar himself surprised many observers.

Boukadoum's visit suggests Algeria's intention to maintain some distance with Turkey's staunch support for the GNA and to adopt a more balanced policy towards the main rival factions in Libya; a policy not dissimilar to those adopted by the Italian government", stated Profazio to the TRT World Research Centre.

The Algerian government has stressed that the toppling of the GNA would cross Algiers' 'red line'. This statement may indicate that Algeria supports the Turkish military assistance to the UN-backed government in Tripoli; Turkey is defending the GNA that Algeria, along with the United Nations, recognises as Libya's legitimate government.

Giorgio Cafiero, the CEO of Gulf State Analytics, has recently [written](#) "Algeria has greater problems with Abu Dhabi's actions in Libya than anything that Turkey is doing in the North African country. With Algeria respecting the GNA's legitimacy and Abu Dhabi backing Haftar as he attempts to topple that government in Tripoli, Algiers' perspective on Turkish versus Emirati interference in Libya is understandable. Nonetheless, it is inaccurate to conclude that Algeria has embraced Turkey's role in Libya, even if Ankara along with Rome and Doha would like to see Algiers align more closely with them on the Libya file".

Algiers has supported UN-backed inclusive initiatives, including the GNA, as a solution to the conflict, seemingly believing that Haftar is incapable of bringing stability to Libya. Furthermore, Algeria seems adamant that Haftar's offensive against Tripoli will likely worsen the security situation in North Africa and the Sahel. The latter is the soft underbelly at its southern border and the source of its worst security concerns.

Algiers seems to view the Haftar forces as a ragtag of different militias, mercenaries, and radical groups, including [Salafi Madkhali groups](#). These Salafis form a [vital component of Haftar's forces](#). If this Salafi ideology gains more prominence in Libya, it may destabilise Algeria's own domestic landscape, which already features a growing number of Salafi movements. In this respect, the number of Algerians loyal to [Saudi sheikh Rabi'al-Madkhali](#) and his closest collaborators are a source of [concern for the Algerian authorities](#). Through the rise of these constituencies in Libya as part of the Haftar apparatus, their Algerian counterparts would undeniably feel emboldened. As a consequence, officials in Algiers [believe that](#) this aspect of Haftar's approach is also unlikely to bring long-lasting peace and stability.

In the past, Haftar had [accused Algeria](#) of trying to exploit the state of war in order to impose its hegemony upon Libya. Haftar also [threatened](#) that "he was capable of transferring the conflict from Libya to Algeria within minutes". On December 18, 2016, Haftar was [banned from entering Algeria](#) in his military uniform because the country did not recognise him as commander of the Libyan Armed Forces,

as it only recognised the Presidential Council.

According to Profazio "From a geopolitical perspective, the Algerian regime cannot allow the establishment of an unfriendly government in Tripoli for strategic reasons. Considering the uneasy relationship with Morocco, it is important for Algiers to have good relations with the authorities in Tripoli. That's the main reason why Algeria has so far been close to the GNA and wary of the manoeuvres of Khalifa Haftar to take control of Tripoli, especially following Haftar's criticism of and his threats against the Algerian army in 2018".

## An Apprehension for the Arab Spring

Since the Arab Spring occurred, the Algerian regime's posture has been broadly [seen](#) as driven by a desire to prevent democratic contagion at its borders. They [were concerned](#) about the possible disintegrative effects of these winds of change. The Algerian authorities considered the collapse of autocratic structures in neighbouring countries as a threat to Algeria's internal stability and its status in the regional balance of power.

Some governments, such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, engaged in a crusade against the forces emanating from the Arab Spring, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). In comparison, Algeria had a more nuanced approach. The government avoided the post-2011 wave of change that hit the MENA region thanks to high oil prices at the time. Therefore, the state managed to [buy social peace](#) through spending on big projects and cheap housing. In addition, the Algerian authorities were not worried about the MB. Over the last three decades, they had developed special relations with the various local chapters of the MB and [co-opted](#) them to a large extent. The Movement for a Society of Peace (MSP), Algeria's self-declared branch of the MB, has been regularly part of the different governments since the late 1990s. While the Algerian authorities were not particularly worried about the MB, they were more apprehensive about the ["chaos of the Arab Spring"](#) and being surrounded by severe crises in the vicinity (the upheaval in Tunisia, a failing state in Libya, security problems in the Sahel, etc.).

Extrapolating this position to Libya, the MB is not the primary source of concern for Algeria. While the GNA is [believed](#) to represent a range of political forces, including members of the MB, this factor is not the driver for Algerian policy in the country. Even Haftar's threats to Algiers were not a decisive factor. Jalel Harchaoui, a Research fellow at Clingendaelorg, [wrote](#): "The Algerians are not opposed in principle to eastern-faction leader Khalifa Haftar ruling all of Libya at some stage. But they are concerned about the uncompromising, polarising, and inconclusive nature of his aggressive approach, along with his fragile coalition".

For Harchaoui, "Algeria's lack of enthusiasm for Haftar is more methodological than ideological. This is not to say that Algiers is indifferent to the ideological ramifications of a Haftar-ruled Libya. An assertive Haftar cannot be separated from the foreign powers that back him. He also brings with him a mode of governance that potentially increases the influence of Madkhali Salafist ideology".

The Algerian Foreign Minister's [meeting](#) with Haftar on February 2020 is particularly significant. It signals that Algeria aims to adopt a more balanced policy towards the different Libyan protagonists.

According to Profazio, "This change in Algeria's policy is particularly important. It represents an unexpected opening towards Haftar that would be welcomed by its main regional sponsors, including Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. At the same time, it would also reinforce Russia's role as a power broker in the Libya conflict, already highlighted by Moscow's recent diplomatic initiatives. Considering Moscow's special relations with Algeria and its enhanced partnership with Egypt, it represents a major opportunity for Russia to align the policy of its two main allies in the region (which also happens to be Libya's neighbours) and drive them together according to its interests".

Algeria is likely to demonstrate a strong aversion to interfering in the domestic affairs of sovereign countries. However, the non-interference approach has limited the strategic alternatives of Algeria to deal with the on-going conflict in Libya.

For Profazio, "it is difficult to imagine that any larger role for Algeria in the conflict, due to its traditional non-interventionist stance. At the same time, in Algiers' view, this policy also needs to be strictly applied to the other powers involved in the Libyan conflict. For these reasons, it is likely that Algeria would continue to strongly oppose any military intervention or foreign meddling in Libya, including Turkey's security and military cooperation with the GNA, even though both Algiers and Ankara's policies seem to be aligned".

The Algerian economy is considerably reliant on hydrocarbons for its exports and government revenues, [standing at 95 and 75 %](#) respectively. The plunge in oil prices in 2020, owing to the Saudi-Russia feud and worldwide demand destruction, has affected Algeria significantly, with prices dropping to an 18-year low of \$21.65 a barrel at the time of writing. As a result, Prime Minister Abdelaziz Djerad has [stated](#) the country faces an extraordinary "multi-dimensional crisis", calling on Algerians to make fewer demands of the government. With the country facing compiled complex socio-economic problems, there will be little appetite for any prominent role in Libya.

According to Profazio, "if Algerian leaders were to take sides in support of Haftar or Serraj's administration, that would be quite the change in position. I suspect heightened Algerian interest is being driven by the extent to which other outside powers are blatantly fuelling the conflict in Libya with arms and financing. The Algerian regime is also more confident that the Hirak mass protest movement has been contained. But if the Saudi-Russian oil war continues to depress prices further, the Algerian regime might be facing a significant fiscal crisis of its own and could turn inward again".

## Conclusion

Algeria is a significant actor in North Africa, and its role in Libya continues to be pivotal. However, the Algerian state's traditional doctrinal principles of non-interference have prevented any prominent role thus far in Libya apart from mediation. Algiers' considerable socio-economic difficulties also deter a more enlarged role in Libya, even if the latter has been a national security issue for Algeria since 2011. The on-going civil war in Libya and the drastic inflow of weapons, radical groups, and foreign mercenaries have long been a source of concern for the Algerian government.

In light of this situation, Algeria is likely to step up its efforts to strengthen border security and to act as a facilitator to bring the Libyan protagonists to the same table. While Algeria remains sceptical of Haftar and his rise as a potential new strongman in Libya, Algiers is also deeply concerned that Haftar's assault on Tripoli is likely to exacerbate the security situation in North Africa and the Sahel.

All things considered, Algiers is playing a delicate balancing act in Libya. Judging from the evolution of the situation on the ground (the GNA's recent military successes in April 2020), and bar any unforeseen circumstances, the Algerian position on the Libyan conflict is not expected to change.



People wave flags of Libya during a protest against the attacks and ceasefire violations of warlord Khalifa Haftar's troops, which has been going on for 10 months, at Martyrs' Square in Tripoli, Libya on January 24, 2020. (Hazem Turkia - Anadolu Agency)