

# How Algeria-Turkey Ambitious Strategic Rapprochement Will Affect France's Sahel Policy?

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**ABSTRACT** *President Macron did decide to withdraw French troops from the Sahel last summer, leaving only special forces based in north Mali, he stated that Operation Barkhane will end early in 2022. Nonetheless, Algiers' decision to not allow French military planes to use Algeria's airspace will create a direct impact on the military mission and France's entire 'war on terror in the Sahel. In Algeria, however, bold decisions toward a strategic rapprochement with Turkey were in the making. Even though the new authorities in Algiers were hesitant for such a foreign policy shift, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the internal political struggle, constitutional and institutional amendments in the aftermath of the peaceful Algerian 2019 Hirak needed to be put in place. However, the tenacious resistance of the Francophile and Arabophone-nationalists anti-Ottoman legacy, the well-off social class, and elite pro-France lobbies in Algiers and Paris held back President Abdelmadjid Tebboune's Administration from improving the relations between Algiers and Ankara. Meanwhile, the ambassadors from both countries have been pushing tirelessly for the success of the strategic rapprochement between these two states.*

**Keywords:** Algeria, Turkey, France, Sahel, Armed Groups, Diplomatic Shift, Rapprochement

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## Introduction

**T**he year 2021 is ending with drastic diplomatic developments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region with Algeria-Turkey relations improving. This is following the announcement of Algeria's Energy Minister, Mohamed Arkab, in October 2021 that the country will form a new partnership with Turkey in the energy and mining sectors, under Algeria's new hydrocarbons regulations. The project's total financial cost is \$1.4 billion, with Renaissance Holding owning a 66 percent stake and Sonatrach owning 34 percent and it aims to produce polypropylene plastic to be used in several industries, including cars and textiles. This was followed by Algerian Minister of Industry, Ahmed Zeghdar's active participation in the Turkey-Africa Business and Economy Forum in İstanbul showing that Algiers is looking East. The Algeria-Turkey deal was launched in January 2020 following the state visit of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Algeria soon after the election of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune in December 2019. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to the country raised Algeria's strategic importance for Turkey to a new higher level. The Turkish government had offered key economic and cultural incentives to Algeria, while both countries were holding onto their socio-economic and geo-economics needs and interests. Among those that are working to poison the two countries' trust in each other are the radical secularists in the national media, notably the

print Francophone and even radical nationalists,<sup>1</sup> who have been tarnishing Turkey's leadership in the region, using fallacious arguments that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a 'Neo-Sultan' who is smoothly moving his pawns in the region and beyond.

The continuing moral diplomatic crisis between Algiers and Paris was provoked by President Emmanuel Macron's decisions and statements, made for the consumption of the French electorate, regarding the thorny question of the deportation of illegal immigrants from the Maghreb and Sahel back to their countries of origin. On this issue, Algerian diplomatic authorities in France have been refusing to pursue the deportation process for legal and national security issues.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Paris responded with severe restrictions to granting visas to citizens from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Nevertheless, Algiers did apply the principle of reciprocity. But the tipping point in the tumultuous relations between the two countries was undoubtedly the amateurish statement of President Macron about the history of the Algerian nation made when the French president met with a group of young people of Algerian descent, in an electoral operation supposed to charm them.<sup>3</sup>

## The Tipping Point

Chronologically, since the election of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, Algeria-France relations did shift from a tone of 'love-and-hate' to 'wait-and-see.' President Emmanuel

Macron and the deep state's influential lobbies in Paris did not swallow the fall of late President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's system and the oligarchs, who had sponsored President Macron's presidential campaign in 2017. They counted on the ramifications of the 2019 *Hirak* Movement, hoping that the relations between the two countries would continue with business as usual.<sup>4</sup>

On the contrary, the new authorities in Algiers, military and civilian alike, established the diplomatic tone and the political behavior, showing new imperatives. Starting with the new military doctrine established in the amended Constitution of November 2020,<sup>5</sup> and followed by the setting of new foreign policy determinants and objectives. Within these was expressed the desire for the demystification of Algeria-France relations at every level and the need for Algiers to follow a new diplomatic paradigm of multiplication of partnerships based on mutual respect. This allows Algiers to choose its strategic allies according to the country's national security and economic interests – a move that Paris did not want to see.

Considering that Algiers did not hesitate to take action against Paris over the visas dispute compounded with Macron's statement against the Algerian authorities and the nation's millennium of historical existence. On the existence of Algeria's nation and eventually state – prominent French historians, such as Professor Benjamin Stora, reminded the French president that during the Ottoman era

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in Algeria, France had appointed 61 Consuls from 1516 to 1830.<sup>6</sup> Algiers responded by recalling its ambassador from Paris and banning French military aircraft from Algeria's airspace. The narration of the story is a changing of post-independence relations between the two countries, where Algeria has shifted in its policy toward France, which will facilitate better relations between Turkey and Algeria.

What President Emmanuel Macron did –provoking Algerian leaders with a solemn meeting with the *Harki* community<sup>7</sup> in the presidential Élysée Palace, imposing harsh measures on visas, and making a derogatory statement about the Algerian nation's history– all demonstrate the ideologized foreign policy of the French president towards Algeria. This motivated the pro-Turkey advocates in Algeria and abroad to fix a credible trajectory against the idealist foreign policy and the neo-colonial paradigm of Macron toward the Maghreb and African Sahel.

## Analysts are arguing that the main reason for the ongoing diplomatic crisis between Algiers and Paris is Mali

In this context, the new leaders in Algeria seem to have found a way to breakthrough over the country's decades-long 'abnormal' relations with France, positioning themselves as serious partners and no longer subordinates. A leadership mentality that the new leaders in Algeria are taking into consideration in recent developments in the African Sahel, as well as the resurgence of Algeria's active and preemptive diplomacy in the African continent, is to a large extent excluding Paris.<sup>8</sup>

### New Geopolitics Actors in the Sahel

Analysts are arguing that the main reason for the ongoing diplomatic crisis between Algiers and Paris is Mali. What did Mali do wrong? Malian military authorities in Bamako have been expressing their anger towards Paris since last year's military coup. Recently they welcomed Russia's role in Mali, a position which would not have been taken without approval from Algiers. Geopolitics is reshaping the entire African Sahel region's landscape; new regional powers are on the rise. Most notably Turkey is gaining a solid posture in the African Sahel, with the Turkish

parliament voting for the extension of their troops' deployment in Mali and the Central African Republic for another year, as the UN-approved EU peacekeeping mission.

This is yet another thorn in the French side, which it cannot accept because of the new axis that is being put in place: Algiers-Moscow-Ankara, in what used to be the French backyard. All these rapid geopolitical developments are irritating President Emmanuel Macron, who is facing a rough election season fighting for his reelection in April 2022. This crucial presidential election has reached a level of selective history narration orchestrated by President Emmanuel Macron and Eric Zemmour,<sup>9</sup> the rising star of the French Islamophobics, who are questioning Algeria's national history and pushing for the whitewashing of evil with respect to France's atrocities in Algeria.

The French military did argue that Algiers' decision would only affect the two logistic flights, flying from the French military base in the city of Istres in Southeast France. Algiers' new military doctrine was established scrupulously in the November 2020 Constitution, in Articles 30 and 31. This will allow Algerian military forces to cross the country's borders after the vote of approval in the Parliament. Algiers is taking a leading role in the Malian crisis –recently it has implicitly supported the interference of Moscow, which has angered Paris, and even Rabat that feels the presence of Russian auxiliary forces



Turkish President Erdoğan and Algerian President Tebboune pose for a photo after signing bilateral agreements between Turkey and Algeria in Algiers, Algeria on January 26, 2020.

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in Mali would reduce Morocco's influence in the African Sahel.<sup>10</sup>

### Paris' Mali Debacle Policy

Paris, on the other hand, is relativizing the impact of Algiers' decision over French military planes, saying that the French drones continue to operate regularly in the African Sahel, taking off from Niamey, Niger.<sup>11</sup> Operation Barkhane's mission in the African Sahel is targeting radical Islamic armed groups in the triangular area between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Militarily, Operation Barkhane needs a regular supply of manpower and military equipment, as a result, the decision of Algerian authorities is interpreted by analysts as a strong message for their French counterparts in France's war on terror. Algiers has fought in this conflict, which requires

in-depth intelligence work, coordination, and direct talks with prominent members of the local community, such as Sufi (Zaouias) religious leaders.<sup>12</sup> Paris and Algiers have been cooperating on this complex issue of national security for decades. Recently, French special forces have shown success in Mali, with the assassinations of the leaders of ISIS in Islamic Maghreb and ISIS in the Sahel, in June 2020 and September 2021, respectively. In these missions, the French intelligence service has been coordinated with their Algerian counterparts, and in October 2021 the French military announced the assassination of Gouma Katiba's leader along the Malian-Burkinabe borders.

The decision of Algerian authorities to ban France's military planes from using their air space is anything but symbolic.<sup>13</sup> Algiers wants to show

## The Algiers-Moscow-Ankara axis is on the rise, and this obliges France to review its African Sahel policy and West Africa policy

Paris that its role in the region, because of its colonial heritage in the Africa Sahel, is no longer taken for granted. It is a shift in the mindset among the leaders in Algeria, as it is in Mali. A change that is having a positive effect on these countries' public policy implementations, notably on foreign and defense policies, and their new attitude towards the former colonizer. The new leaders in Algiers are using their multiplication partnership paradigm to pressurize Paris to end its scornful attitude towards Algeria. A similar view is being set by Malian leaders. The Malian Prime minister has accused France of training terrorist groups and handed over an enclave in North Mali to the armed group of Ansar a-Dine. He told Russian news agency RIA Novosti that Malian military forces have no access to and that French troops have begun to withdraw from, the Northern cities of Kidal, Tessalit, and Timbuktu.<sup>14</sup>

France seems to be taking the moral crisis with Algiers seriously, however it is only another episode in the two countries' 'abnormal' relations, as next year Algeria will be celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the country's independence from France. Thus,

new regional and international superpowers, notably Turkey and Russia, are also looking to the African Sahel as a new direction for their global strategy in the African continent.

Turkey, which is becoming a geopolitics obsession in France, like Russia, is showing full support to Algeria to stand up to France. The Algiers-Moscow-Ankara axis is on the rise, and this obliges France to review its African Sahel policy and West Africa policy. This is a region where France is heavily deploying its soldiers and lobbies, claiming Paris is there to battle armed Islamic groups in this vast region, that in fact needs local development and bold nation-building programs. The people of the region are tired of lethal weapons and a military operation that is stuck in the harsh dunes of the African Sahel.<sup>15</sup>

### Algiers-Ankara: Active and Pro-Active Diplomacy

The Algeria-Turkey strategic rapprochement had its value confirmed by the visit of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Algeria in January 2020, the first state visit of a foreign leader following the election of Abdelmadjid Tebboune in December 2019. A rapprochement that left the anti-Algeria-Turkey rapprochement camp to wonder.

Algeria-Turkey relations have been through difficult times, and to some extents have suffered from mutual suspicion. The Cold War imperatives imposed a foreign policy paradigm

purely based on an ideologized foreign policy from both countries. Later on, a rise of détente between the two countries appeared under President Turgut Özal in the mid-80s<sup>16</sup> that opened up a new era of mutual cooperation and better understanding. This was progressively enhanced under late President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's second term from 2004 to 2009.

Yet, the Turkey-Algeria strategic rapprochement has been facing resistance. Who is behind this opposition to the new Algeria-Turkey rapprochement? An ideological *laïque* outlook that finds its reason in the official history books about the Ottoman era in Algeria. Firstly, Ankara is following attentively the dynamic of change that is taking place in Algeria, while President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has a positive image among a large majority of Algerians in the country and indeed in the entire Maghreb region. Secondly, Turkish politics looks pretty much like Algerian politics in terms of foreign interference variations and challenges, Algerians, like Turks, are patriots who don't like to be scorned by foreign countries and are highly suspicious about any opposition to their government acting abroad and supported by foreign countries.

Thirdly, Algeria-Turkey relations entered an unprecedented qualitative step, thanks to the good intentions of the leadership of the two countries, which are genuinely restoring their relations, which have suffered a great deal for long periods in the past. Turkey sees Algeria as an important ally on the southern bank of the Mediter-

anean, given Algeria's geopolitical position that makes it on the trajectory of Ankara's logistical center for its Africa policy on the one hand, and the role of the deep historical relations between the two countries on the other hand that would solidify further their new and ambitious rapprochement.

Finally, there are economic considerations that make Algeria a solid partner for Turkey. Algeria is the fourth largest economy in Africa and an important source of energy due to its large reserves of Natural Gas and Oil. It is the fourth largest LNG exporter to Turkey, after Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan. In recent years the two countries have witnessed a strong push for economic relations between them, exemplified by: an agreement with the Algerian oil company Sonatrach in 2018 to establish a petrochemical site in the city of Adana valued at \$1.4 billion; establishing a high-level cooperation council for the agriculture sector, where an agreement between the two countries is entering into force; proceeding with new partnership agreements in the energy and mining sectors, as well as on cultural, educational and commercial levels.<sup>17</sup> Algeria is also Turkey's gateway to the Maghreb and the African Sahel. Algeria is looking forward to benefiting from the Turkish experience in economic development and peaceful democratic transition. This was achieved during the past two decades after Turkey suffered from economic difficulties that made it sink into public debt. Algeria also considers Turkey a relevant Mediterranean ally that



Buses converted into mobile museums to educate the public on France's colonial-era opened for visitors to celebrate the 67<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Algeria's Revolution from France, in Algiers, Algeria on November 1, 2021.

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can be a stabilizing force considering the turmoil in the MENA region. Algeria also views Turkey as a gateway to Asian and European spaces. Therefore, there is a legitimate ambition at the leadership level of the two countries to push forward and upgrade these excellent relations from their economic and commercial nature to a strategic one that allows expanding areas of cooperation and partnership to other sectors. This would provide an added value to the two countries' relations, which would seriously impact the role of France's military and economic policies in the Maghreb and the African Sahel.

### Moments of Doubts

During the two decades of late President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's era, the French lobby was very powerful and

active in the bilateral business and cooperation between Algeria and France. The oligarchs had deliberately antagonized relations between Turkey and Algeria. It is fitting to remember the statement issued by then-Premier Ahmed Ouyahia (now in prison charged with corruption) when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan addressed France's atrocities in Algeria, demanding it bears its responsibility for its colonialist past in the country. Then-Premier Ahmed Ouyahia stated that this was not Turkey's business.

Former Premier Ouyahia continued "Turkey had not supported Algeria in the Liberation War (1954-1962), and more than this, Turkey voted against the Algerian cause in the United Nations General Assembly..."<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, former Minister of Information and Ambassador

Abdelaziz Rehabi told the media that the Turkish government had filed a written apology to Algeria for voting against the independence of Algeria from the French occupation in the UN General Assembly in 1957. Algerians should know that in 1986 the Turkish government submitted a written request to Algeria asking for forgiveness for standing against the UN Resolution for the independence of Algeria, undersigned by the then-Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Özal. He specified that the written apology was hand-delivered to former-President Chadli Bendjedid by a Turkish envoy.

Turkey and Algeria share a common history as well as deep-rooted cultural and brotherly ties, despite the long political drought between Algiers and Ankara in their bilateral relations due to the conditions of the cold war years in the 1970s and mid-1980s. Yet, the coming of the AK Party to power in 2002 in Turkey changed Ankara's North Africa and Maghreb foreign policy determinants, providing a new paradigm that is gaining trust among the local population across the region. A sense of change was expressed for instance during the Algerian *Hirak*, appearing in slogans that read: "Algerians Want a Leader Like President Erdoğan," and asking President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to lift the visa ban for Algerians to enter Turkey.

The Algerian-Turkish rapprochement under the AK Party Administration has gained momentum over recent years starting with the Friend-

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ship and Cooperation Agreement, which was signed during the visit of then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Algeria in 2006. Recently, Renaissance Holding partnered with the Algerian National Oil and Petrol company Sonatrach to develop a polypropylene production plant in Ceyhan Mega Petrochemistry Industry Zone, signifying a \$1.2 billion investment. The proposed facility, which will become the first investment in the area, will feature a production capacity of 450,000 tons. Set to become operational in 2023, the facility will reduce the current deficit by \$450 to \$500 million each year. During his visit to Turkey in 2005, late President Abdelaziz Bouteflika suggested establishing a 'Commonwealth of Ottoman States' under Turkey's leadership.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the latest active and pro-active diplomacy of the two countries, in breaking down the previous anti-Turkey-Algeria strategic rapprochement, is causing France to react in a state of panic with its foreign policy in the Maghreb and the African Sahel, notably in its war on terror such as in Operation Barkhane in the Sahel region. The anti-Tur-

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key-Algeria rapprochement camp is realizing that the relations between Ankara and Algiers have entered a new phase of public diplomacy and strategic cooperation.

France is losing its historical colonial influence in the Maghreb region and the African Sahel, at least among the people and young elite who are less radicalized ideologically by the pro-French mindset. This section of Algerian society is looking to develop the country through a new language curriculum that will replace the dominant role of the French language in public life in Algeria.<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

Today Turkey and Algeria, who share more than ‘*Zorna* and *Baklava*’ in their festive moments, also share geopolitics and geoeconomics stands that a new generation of politicians, diplomats, and academics in both countries, are manifesting their will to a reunion process. Algeria is on the eve of the sixtieth anniversary of its independence from the harshest occupa-

tion and the bloodiest wars throughout the hundred and thirty-two years of occupation –it’s time for the two nations to reunite with their common history, deep civilizations, and destiny that recalls renaissance. Bearing in mind the history of these two nations since the election of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune in December 2019 there has been a genuine sentiment of cooperation from both sides.

The 11<sup>th</sup> session of the Algeria-Turkey joint intergovernmental commission on economic, scientific, and technical cooperation held an expert-level meeting on Tuesday, November 9, 2021, in Algiers. Following this was the announcement of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune’s office that he would visit Turkey in December 2021, in response to the invitation of his Turkish counterpart.

This sentiment has been further demonstrated by the two countries’ ambassadors, who are respectively active and have been more than classic ambassadors, unlike their predecessors.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes idealist diplomats make a contribution developed from the perspective of his and her country’s cultural, political, social, and economic context, which takes into consideration the merits of the host country’s perspectives with skillful diplomacy. Everyone still has to deal with the strange pre-cold war paradox in their own way: there is a part of Turkey in Algeria and there is a part of Algeria in Turkey.

The moral crisis, though, between Algiers and Paris is expected to have a

significant impact on the French military anti-terrorism activities in the African Sahel and the entire Saharan strip. The Algerian military has been leading an active counterattack tactic against Paris. For months the military in Algiers have been observing Paris' rhetoric diplomatic rhetoric about the region, whether in Libya, Tunisia and lately in the Sahel, to the Pegasus scandal, in which it was noticed that Paris was too timid and complicit with Rabat. On the Libyan dossier, Algiers doesn't want a failed state or militias on its borders, consequently, the Algerian president is working very hard to save Libya and Libyans from further chaos. Algerian authorities consider instability on its borders are a direct threat to the country's national security, whether in Libya, Tunisia, Mali, Niger, and recently on the western borders with Morocco.

France worked hard to prevent the Paris II Libya Conference that took place in Paris on November 12, from being a remake of the 2018 Paris Conference on Libya, which was a real diplomatic fiasco for France. The leaders from Turkey and Algeria did not participate in the Paris II Libya Conference. However, both countries have strong stakes in Libya, in terms of national security and domestic stability matters for Algiers, and geoeconomics and geopolitics for Ankara. Consequently, another diplomatic failure for President Macron, the Libya-focused summit, organized with the United Nations, Germany, and Italy in Paris on November 12, 2021, was expected to gather some 20 regional and inter-

national heads of state. Delaying the presidential election, now planned on December 24, 2021, has threatened to derail Libya's efforts to end a decade of political violence.

The Algeria-Turkey ambitious rapprochement is putting Paris into panic mode and impacting its economic and linguistic interests as well as its military interests in the entire Maghreb region and the African Sahel. With this stance, France's influence, and ability to intervene in these regions, vital for its national interest, are in danger. Turkey, on the other hand, has become a serious rival to France in the region's new geopolitics and economics mutations. As a result, the Algerian-Turkish rapprochement pattern would provoke in the long run the emergence of a new concept of democracy and economic development: unlike the one people in these regions have been experiencing through their partnership with western democracies. Today, this paradigm is on the rise and well-received in Algeria. ■

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