


# Algeria's Role in the African Sahel: Toward a New Security Paradigm

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This paper investigates the Algerian role in the Sahel region. Traditionally, Algeria has always been a key broker of stability in the African Sahel, which continues to face crucial challenges and significant threats. As a regional power, Algeria has interests in the Sahel owing to geographical contiguity, strategic depth and historical ties. Consequently, Algeria's renewed interest in sub-Saharan Africa is driven to a large extent by the growth of regional terrorism, and the collapse of the Malian State in 2012, followed by the French military intervention in Mali in 2013. As such, Algeria insists on maintaining an autonomous approach in engineering its security strategy in the region. As part of its security approach, Algeria seeks to prioritise political and diplomatic mechanisms over those of the military in order to manage risks within a framework that combines securitization and humanization. This paper takes a role theory lens to examine Algeria as a middle power, one that transcends the logic based on material capabilities and tangible resources.

*Key Words:* Algeria, security, African Sahel, Mali, counter terrorism

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, Algeria has increasingly focused on African Sahel security issues for fear that the region could become a haven for terrorist groups. The Sahelian states, which share extensive borders with Algeria, have witnessed insecurity due to the instability in their political systems. This political instability was impacted by different crises that several countries in the region, including Mali, have been dealing with. This kind of weak political situation is obvi-

ously a reflection of the domino theory.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the collapse of one state could cause a domino effect that might destabilize the entire region.

[156] On the other hand, by using national role conceptions, we can explain better the Algerian strategy in the African Sahel, as well as by using other approaches, common in the literature, such as the identity-based approach. So, in order to provide a better framework of analysis for Algeria's activism in the African Sahel, we are going to elaborate why we find national role conceptions theory to be the most suitable one for our research. This paper argues that the updated Algerian strategy in the Sahel is marked by strong activism and vibrant engagement in order to protect its national interests abroad and to expand its regional leverage and soft power in the Sahel region. Therefore, in order to better understand Algeria's growing role in the tumultuous Sahel region, it is useful to consider how changes at the regional level coupled with major security concerns can affect intraregional dynamics. Recent literature has attributed Algerian involvement in its neighbourhood to its geographic centrality as a neighbour to the three countries that make up African Sahel, where Algeria has always been a regional heavyweight. By the same token, Algeria's growing activities across the Sahel region (Algeria's top geopolitical priority region) fall under the banner of reaffirming Algeria's role in its neighbourhood and shifting regional trends as mainly an instrument in the larger geopolitical contest with regional competitors. Accordingly, most literature has adopted an explanatory logic to explore how the Sahel region has tremendously strategic importance for Algeria. However, this geopolitical explanation for the 'fact-based strategic focus' does not appear sufficient if it is not coupled with the relevancy of the state's geopolitical regional environment and the interests of its ruling regime in conditioning its responses to external constraints and determin-

<sup>1</sup> The basic logic underlying the domino theory is that the changes in one country's political system spreads to neighbouring countries, affecting these countries' political systems similarly, which spreads to their neighbours, and so on (Ninkovich 1994).



ing its foreign policy outcome and not least, the complexities in international dynamics. Alternatively, role theory can be an analytical vehicle to study how changes at the global level can affect regional dynamics. According to role theory, a role is defined as 'a pattern of recurring action that performs a function within the context of a system of interacting elements or in a situation.' Holsti (1970, 233) defines national role conceptions as 'the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions, suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in subordinate regional systems. As a matter of fact, major views in academic literature that try to interpret Algeria's recent strategy in the African Sahel can be roughly assessed in three groups according to their causation.

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Firstly, Algeria's geopolitical location has defined the nature of its security doctrine since independence to this day, vis-à-vis its neighbour, especially in the African Sahel, which in turn dictates Algeria's insistence on maintaining an autonomous approach in engineering its security strategy in the region. Secondly, the African Sahel region is considered to be sensitive to the security of Algeria, especially the southern region of Algeria. In fact, the African Sahel is, as Yahia Zoubir puts it, 'Algeria's Soft underbelly' and 'the corridor of all danger' (Zoubir 2018, 72). These factors have forced Algeria to take draconian steps, or even security measures, to ensure and defend its territorial sovereignty and to face the various threats emanating from the Sahel as they endanger the security and the sovereignty of Algeria. Thirdly, in parallel with the African Sahel region becoming an 'arc of crises,' the debates on its complex crises, which have their own domino effects beyond the national borders, project serious security challenges to their wider neighbourhood, which has significantly increased the literature, already dealing with Algerian security perceptions and behaviour in the African Sahel.

This paper aims to deconstruct the Algerian strategy dynamics in the African Sahel by using role theory, which offers a conceptual repertoire and framework to examine a role-based argument. This argument starts from the premise that the foreign policy of a re-

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gional actor is not only driven by interests and survival, but also by social positions and standings in the system. Thus, it is hoped that such a theoretical framework will yield a more exhaustive understanding of the shifts in Algeria's regional policy, its different dimensions, as well as the various limitations and prospects that yields. The paper is structured as follows: first, it starts by exploring Algeria's Sahelian policy as a framework to examine the interaction between global and regional levels through the lens of role theory and how this interaction can shape Algeria's behaviour at the regional level; then, it will offer an outlook as to how a perception of change in the role of Algeria in the region has engendered changes in regional actors' roles.

This aim will be further fulfilled by answering two specific research questions:

- 1 How do Algerian government officials formulate foreign policy with respect to the Sahel region?
- 2 What signs of the different roles (active independent, regional leader) can be found in Algeria's foreign policy with respect to the Sahel region and Algeria's middle power role?

#### ALGERIAN STRATEGY DYNAMICS IN THE AFRICAN SAHEL

Algeria has been the principal mediator and guarantor of previous peace accords in northern Mali for years, a region considered as part of its sphere of influence. Historically, Algiers has long positioned itself as a traditional mediator of conflicts in Mali since 1991, when the Algerian mediation succeeded in bringing the opposition forces of the People's Movement of Azawad and the Arabic Islamic Front of Azawad (FIAA) to agree to the Tamanrasset Accord with the Malian government (Lacher 2013).

In recent years, the Algerian authorities have constantly sought to centralize the fight against terrorism by the creation, in April 2010, of a Joint Operational Staff Committee (CEMOC), consisting of representatives from Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger (Tamboura 2016). Located in Tamanrasset (South of Algeria), the CEMOC



planned to mobilize more than 25,000 combatants, including 5,000 Tuareg, in 2011, but this never materialised. For some military experts, the failure of the CEMOC is a result of inadequate security cooperation, such as intelligence sharing and joint patrols. In addition, the Operation Serval in Mali in spring 2013 was perceived by Algiers as interference in its area of influence (Tamboura 2016). This section maintains that most efforts deployed by Algiers regarding the Malian peace process, as well as the fight against terrorism in the Sahel, was aimed at securing Algeria's regional hegemony, notably by keeping Western forces away from the region. Furthermore, complicated relations between France and Algeria have likewise affected the landscape of interventions (Boukhars 2012, 13). The creation of the G5 Sahel joint force has been at least in part a product of power-plays among the major regional actors. Although Algerian policymakers have not rejected the principle of wider regional cooperation, they have viewed attempts to bring Morocco into the CEMOC or other non-Sahelian organisations negatively, asserting that Morocco is not a Sahelian state with the fear that recognising Morocco as a Sahelian state would go against Algeria's stance on Western Sahara, which borders the Sahel.

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Furthermore, Algeria and Morocco compete over regional leadership. Consequently, Algeria sees France and its regional allies, namely Morocco, as the biggest hurdle in its quest for regional dominance. The two countries have endured tense relations over a variety of issues, including the question of Western Sahara, which has hindered the prospect of close security and military cooperation between them (Boukhars 2012, 15). Furthermore, the long-standing competition between the two great regional powers, Algeria and Morocco, in and beyond the Western Sahara, has blocked regional security collaboration, not least the AU's role in managing the crisis (Zoubir 2018, 87).

In December 2014, the African Union launched its own regional peace and dialogue initiative known as the Nouakchott Process, which brought together eleven member states from across the Sahel and Maghreb in order to strengthen and coordinate security cooperation within the African Peace and Security Architecture

(APSA) in the Sahelo-Saharan region. Much like previous initiatives in the region, however, the effectiveness of the APSA was hampered by the persistent rivalries between its member states (Fejerskov, Ravnkilde, and Albrecht 2017, 49).

[160] Taking all these factors into account, and as Algerian scholar Zoubir (2018, 88) asserts, Algeria's reaction to the G5:

Is very negative for two reasons: the first is that the feeling of having been double-crossed by France, especially after having created and financed the CEMOC and certain regional initiatives; the second is that it allows the lasting installation of foreign bases in the Sahel and blurs the cards by mixing up the armies of the region.

For Algerian policymakers and analysts, not only is France-sponsored G5 a non-African initiative, despite its depiction by international backers (France in particular), but it is also inconceivable that Algeria would join a force 'sponsored' by a non-African entity, France, Algeria's former colonial power. Algerians are very averse to alliances, especially military ones. While it pursues an incontestable fight against violent extremist organizations (VEOS), Algeria favours a peace process and a politically sustainable resolution to the conflict in the Sahel. This means linking security issues to development by promoting inclusive regional economic development, a lesson that Algerian authorities learned at a high cost from their own national tragedy in the 1990s. For that reason, Algeria is opposed to the idea of collaborating with foreign troops, especially French, in the fight against Jihadists. This could substantiate Jihadist ideology and propaganda of a war of 'infidels' against Muslims and thus, embolden the dormant VEOS in Algeria.

More importantly, Algeria is concerned that such intervention may inadvertently target the Tuareg, resulting in an intensification of the nationalist feelings and solidarity of the large Berber ethnic group across the region, thus jeopardising the Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Mali. Similarly, Algeria is also concerned that a major French offensive in northern Mali could result in an incursion



of terrorist groups into Algeria, compelling Algeria to become militarily involved in the Sahel (Zoubir 2018, 88). At the same time, however, Algerian analysts surmise that, regardless of Algeria's reservations about the G5, Algerians will cooperate with this organisation through intelligence sharing and logistics, as it has done with Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane. Furthermore, Algeria already has military agreements with three of the five Sahelian states (Mali, Mauritania and Niger) in the G5 (Touré 2021, 16).

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ROLE THEORY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING  
ALGERIAN SAHELIAN POLICY

With regard to middle-power literature, role theory can capture the variety of roles taken by middle powers in the international order through specifically examining how both structure and material interests, as advocated by the position approach, as well as norms, championed by the behavioural approach, motivate them to pursue middle-power status. Moreover, it can also capture the political dynamics within the state, which also affect the status-seeking behaviour of middle powers, as suggested by the recent literature (Jordaan 2003, 166).

In fact, certain roles, such as coalition-builder, mediator and bridgebuilder, are highly associated with middle powers. However, other roles are performed by states in their pursuit of middle-power status. Therefore, the roles enacted to achieve middle-power status are different, not only between traditional middle powers and emerging middle powers, but also among emerging middle powers. Instead of differentiating middle-power behaviour based on a distinction between traditional and emerging middle powers, the variations in middle-power behaviour can best be understood by examining each state's role conception. Here, the notion of role conception can bridge the foreign policy agenda of states and their status-seeking behaviour in the pursuit of middle-power status. Rather than treating it as merely a function of material capability or good international citizenship, this article aims to show that middle-power behaviour is driven by role conceptions enacted by policymakers to play a more significant role in the international

[162] order. Therefore, role conceptions could be an in-between link for middle powers' status-seeking behaviour and their foreign policy agenda. Doing this will provide a more nuanced explanation of middle-power behaviour, which might differ between one middle power and another (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 6).

With this position, Algeria is expected to play the role of an active regional leader. Under Tebboune's presidency, Algeria did not aim to carry out its role as a regional leader in the region per se, but further used its regional leadership role in the region to pursue middle-power status at the global level. Algeria's regional leadership has increased its leverage as a middle power in several notable forums (Arab Maghreb Union, Arab League, Organization of the Islamic Conference, African Union) as well as parliamentary, functional and international organizations, the United Nations and its agencies. Algeria has also assisted in implementing the AU Plan of Action on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism by hosting and helping staff the Africa Center for Studies and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT),<sup>2</sup> which aims to guide and coordinate counterterrorism across Africa. In addition, Algeria has launched, separate from the African Peace & Security Architecture (APSA), its own security cooperation initiatives for the so-called *pays du champs* of the Sahel, such as the regional command for joint counterterrorism operations in Tamanrasset (Nickels 2014).

Building on Holsti's observations that states could play multiple roles, we can see that Algerian policymakers during the last two years are not reconfiguring Algeria's international roles in order to align Algerian foreign policy with its growing self-identification with middle-power status. Rather, its policymakers continue to perform Algeria's role as a regional leader by extending its scope into the global arena. Thus, although the conception as a regional leader began long before Algerian policymakers self-identified Algeria with a middle-power status, arguably since Tebboune's presidency, Algerian policymakers have utilised its role conception as a regional leader to strengthen its growing self-identification as a

<sup>2</sup> See <http://caert.org.dz/fr/>.





middle power. According to Holsti, the active independent role goes beyond the mere pursuit of an 'independent' foreign policy (Holsti 1970, 285). Instead, it emphasizes 'at once independence, self-determination, possible mediation functions, and active programs to extend diplomatic and commercial relations to diverse areas of the world' (p. 262). In Algeria, the ultimate strategy of the post-*Hirak* president, Tebboune, was to establish the country as an independent regional and international actor that has the ability to make decisions based on its national interests rather than based on the interests of other states. Moreover, the 'active' component of the role entails the expansion of relations with other states within and beyond the Sahel region. This active independent role is largely supported by President Tebboune, which points to the belief that Algeria must cultivate relations and develop economic and security cooperation with diverse regions of the world.

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This role is clearly reflected in state documents as well as in Tebboune's various speeches from 2019 to 2022. Tebboune stressed in a periodic interview with the representatives of the national media the necessity for Algerians to be 'convinced that their country is a regional power,' warning against the attempts to 'minimize' Algeria's pioneering role, led by sides dictating behind the scenes through what is called the fourth-generation wars that aim to destabilize the country by exploiting its children' (Ghebouli 2021). He also expressed his desire to bolster Algeria's position and role in addressing regional crises (Bobin 2020). Under Tebboune, Algeria has notably expanded its political and economic relations with Italy, Germany, Russia, and Turkey, where the Algerian-Turkish strategic partnership has reached its 'golden age' in recent years. To some extent, the active choice to broaden Algeria's non-traditional engagements with other states provides more flexibility when engaging with its traditional allies (Toumi 2021, 47).

Algeria's stance in the Sahel can be interpreted as a way to manage the tension between its historical role and its current expectations. Algeria's historical role as a voice for developing countries, initiated by Houari Boumediene (1965–1978) during the formative years of its nation-building after independence, has caused it to

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take a slightly oppositional stance towards the Western global order. Within the United Nations, Algeria voiced its criticism of the West-led liberal order, calling for reform of the liberal world order. Algeria's experience of rejecting colonialism through physical struggle has also played a significant role in making the spirit of anti-colonialism an integral part of Algeria's foreign policy objectives, which are enshrined in the preamble to its constitution. This historical role has consistently been translated into Algeria's stance in many international forums, such as the United Nations and the AU (Malley 1996, 132).

While Algeria's role as active independent has increased under Bouteflika's presidency, its role as regional leader has been significantly reduced under his fourth term presidency (2014–2019) due to the perceived lack of benefit in taking on such a role (Daguzan 2015, 41). This also shows that a newer role conception enacted to pursue middle-power status, such as active independent, is less likely to be stable compared with a more institutionalised role, such as regional leader, which has become Algeria's historical role. As a result, under Tebboune, Algeria tends to voice a more revisionist stance based on its role as a regional leader driven by the altered expectations of the international community. Although Algeria is a putative middle power, it has been restrained by its focus on the regional level. This is evident from its persistence in taking the role of a regional leader in order to showcase its global outlook (Algeria Press Service 2020a)

Under the presidency of Tebboune (2019–present), the pursuit of middle-power status continues to be Algeria's foreign policy objective. In enhancing Algeria's middle-power status, Tebboune has focused on playing a greater role at the regional level (Algeria Press Service 2020b). However, Algerian policy makers' vision for the country's middle-power roles with a greater regional focus on the Sahel was primarily driven by three factors—namely, uncertainty about Morocco's rise as a regional balancer, countering the intraregional security threats and the impact of the great powers' rivalry in the region. Hence, in a strategic regional environment characterized by unbalanced multipolarity, growing Algerian activism can be attributed to Algeria's attempt to support peace and stability in



the Sahel, specifically in the context of an erosion of French hegemony in the region. In contrast, given the regional constraints, and in particular, the fragile regional security environment that hinders Algeria from playing a greater regional role in mediating the Libyan and Malian crisis, the notion of role conflict introduced by role theory can better explain why Algeria has moved away from its previously conceived middle-power role as a regional balancer. While self-identification with a middle-power status is still intact and more entrenched, the analysis of Algeria's role preferences in pursuing middle-power status shows how significant historical roles are in affecting role conceptions enacted in the pursuit of middle-power status. Role conceptions that are incompatible with historical roles are more likely to be abandoned or challenged by domestic discourse. Furthermore, the change in Algeria's role conception, from a heavy regional leader towards an active independent and vice versa, demonstrates that both historical and alter expectations are crucial factors that drive its role preferences as a middle power.

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THE TUAREG QUESTION IN THE ALGERIAN  
SECURITY APPROACH: TESTING ALGERIA'S  
MIDDLE-POWERHOOD

The Sahel has been a source of concern for Algeria for a long time due to a variety of reasons. Beyond the issue of terrorism, Algeria has been quite concerned about the turn of events regarding the Tuareg question and the situation in northern Mali after the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya. The Tuareg question is not new, but there have been critical changes since autumn 2011. Colonial France's redrawing of African borders resulted in the dispersal of the Tuareg population throughout the Maghreb and Sahel regions. However, as scattered as they are, the Tuareg have been able to maintain some connections thanks to the seasonal movements (transhumance) across the region. Furthermore, in the late 1960s the Algerian government recognized the rights of its Tuareg population, which was resentful of Gaddafi, who nevertheless, had accepted the creation of training camps and encouraged the birth of a Tuareg independent movement as well as the establishment of an indepen-

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dent Tuareg state as a way of exerting leverage over rival actors in the region, particularly Algeria. One of the significant consequences of the civil war in Libya was the massive return of the well-equipped and highly experienced Libya-based Tuareg to Mali and Niger in August 2011. Certainly, this has raised Algeria's security concerns as effective management of the Tuareg issue has always been one of the pillars of Algeria's strategy in the region, which explains why Tuareg aspirations for statehood have always been met with disapproval in Algiers. While Algerian policymakers empathize with Malian Tuareg, they regard Tuareg demands for autonomy or irredentism suspiciously. Unsurprisingly, regardless of this empathy, they reacted negatively to the proclamation of the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNL A) of an independent state in northern Mali in April 2012 (Damme and Van 2015, 10).

Likewise, this standpoint is consistent with Algeria's policy against secessionist movements and any political, social or ethnic categories that could threaten the internationally-recognized national unity and territorial integrity of the state. Since the late 1960s, Algerians have succeeded in integrating their Tuareg population into the political process through the representation of notables in parliament, within the structures of the National Liberation Front (FLN) or by settling Tuareg populations in southern Algeria, providing them with the necessary modern means to improve their living conditions. Hence, any secessionist desires are seen as a threat to Algeria's own national security and territorial integrity. This explains why Algeria led the mediation process between the Tuareg in northern Mali and the central government in Bamako in the 1990s, 2006, and 2012 (Damme and Van 2015, 46). Algeria's opposition to foreign intervention derives from the position of its foreign policy as well as fears that intervention may strengthen jihadist ideology and consolidate secessionist sentiments in the region. The ideal scenario would be a political solution based on the separation of the Tuareg groups represented by the MNL A and Ansar Dine from AQIM and MUJAO (Movement for oneness and jihad in west Africa, al-Mourabitoun) (Boukhars 2015, 4). The rationale is that distinction would be twice as effective as addressing the Tuareg's demands and also prove to



be a fighting factor against terrorist groups, possibly with Tuareg assistance (Lounnas 2014, 816).

Furthermore, foreign intervention has the potential of destabilizing an already volatile region astride Algeria's southern borders. One of the premises of the state's policy toward the Tuareg is that governments in the region should address the socioeconomic, political, and cultural demands of their respective Tuareg minorities. In fact, it was partly the non-compliance of the Malian president, Amadou Toumani Touré, with the Algiers-brokered agreements between the Tuareg and the Malian government that triggered the events of early 2012, resulting in the debacle of the Malian army in northern Mali and the military coup that overthrew him (Bernard 2013, 22). Without doubt, the coup that plunged Mali into a political crisis compelled Algeria to reassess the management of its security along its southern borders and seek a peaceful resolution for the conflict (International Crisis Group 2012). It essentially aims to contain the effects of Azawad's search for independence among other Tuareg populations in Mali, Niger, Libya and Algeria. In addition, there is a fear that foreign intervention could lead to yet another influx of Malian refugees into Algeria, which already hosts about 20,000 Malian refugees that escaped earlier in 2013. Ever since France decided that military intervention was necessary to preserve its interests in the Sahel region, Algeria has sought to convince its African partners to re-establish Mali's territorial integrity through dialogue with the Tuareg (Chikhaoui 2017).

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In his interview with *Le Figaro*, in February 2020, President Tebboune stated that 'the Accord d'Alger was almost perfect'<sup>3</sup> and was 'the only possible way that the south of Mali could integrate northern Mali in its structures and institutions' (Portes and Matarese 2020). Actually, this declaration mirrors a long-standing policy towards the Sahel region; a policy not new in the history of Algeria

<sup>3</sup> Accord for peace and reconciliation in Mali emanating from the Algiers process, the peace agreement was formally signed on 15 May 2015 by the Government of Mali, the Platform and two groups forming part of the CMA. The remaining CMA groups signed the accord on 20 June 2015 (Wiklund and Nilsson 2016).

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that referred to Boumediene ideas in foreign policy, in an attempt to reprise the same political strategies adopted during the Boumediene era, which became the cornerstone of the renewed official Algerian foreign policy doctrine. Yet, after his election in December 2019, president Tebboune has tried to reinvigorate Algeria's 'neighbourhood first' policy, in part to counteract the complex neighbourhood threats and reaffirm its regional role, given its geographic position as a resident power. By the same token, some Algerian analysts have advocated for Algeria to alter its Sahelian policy due to shifts in the regional and domestic security environment (French military withdraw in late 2021, and the ongoing political crisis due to the putsch in Mali on May 2021, which is the third coup d'état in ten years after 2012 and 2020).

RESHAPING THE SAHEL: WHAT FUTURE  
FOR THE ALGERIAN ROLE?

After the nationwide protests in February 2019, which resulted in Bouteflika's decision to step down, an election was eventually held on 12 December 2019, where Abdelmadjid Tebboune, a former prime minister, was elected president. The economy remains highly dependent on hydrocarbons, which represent 98 % of total exports and roughly 60 % of the government's revenues. This wealth has allowed Algeria to invest in its security sector – it has the largest military budget in Africa – and the Algerian government aims to improve its equipment and develop strong capabilities in the field of counter-terrorism (Achy 2013, 23). The Algerian Department of Intelligence and Security<sup>4</sup> is regarded by some as one of the 'most effective intelligence service when it comes to fighting al-Qaeda in the Sahel' (Schindler 2012). Although some also point to the unorthodox methods used by the DRS in counter-terrorism activities, including the infiltration of terrorist groups (Schindler 2012), Algeria's delib-

<sup>4</sup> Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has dissolved the DRS (Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité) on January 2016. The DRS was replaced by the Department of Surveillance and Security DSS which, unlike its predecessor, report directly to the presidency as the entire security and intelligence apparatus.



erately uncompromising counter-terrorism policy derives from the country's experience of internal armed conflict during the 1990s. The war between the Algerian military regime and armed Islamist groups is estimated to have cost 200,000 lives, and it has shaped the North African state's approach to fighting terrorist groups. This experience has made Algeria a key ally in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel for the US and many EU countries, such as France, since the early 2000s. Examples of counter-terrorism collaboration include the 2002 Pan Sahel Initiative – which became the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership in 2005 – currently coordinated by the US military Africa Command (AFRICOM), based in Stuttgart (Zoubir 2009, 995).

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Algeria has also been part of important regional initiatives aimed at fighting terrorism. Among these is the decision taken in April 2010 by the four countries most directly affected by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger – to create the Joint Operational General Staff Committee (CEMOC) (Arieff 2012, 2), based in Tamanrasset in South Algeria, 400 km from Algeria's southern border. Its purpose is to ensure better cooperation among these countries in the fight against terrorism, kidnappings and trafficking, and the conduct of joint operations in each of the participating states. In September 2011, an international conference on the fight against terrorism in the Sahel was hosted by Algeria, with the aim of further strengthening cooperation among the participating countries.

By 2019, JNIM (Jama'at Nusratul Islam wal Muslim), a merger of jihadist groups formed in March 2017, was launching attacks throughout the Sahel, while ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara)<sup>5</sup> expanded and did likewise throughout the region as well as against Algeria, something JNIM had refrained from doing. At the same time, Mali continued to disintegrate, and after years of endless war, France announced that it was withdrawing from Mali.

<sup>5</sup> A jihadist movement led by Abu Walid al-Saharawi perpetrated attacks against the military and civilians in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and pledged allegiance to the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) in 2015.

[170] While the start of the *Hirak* initially meant the total disappearance of Algeria from the Sahel, the December 2019 election of president Tebboune changed this. He instantly made it clear that Algeria was to return to the regional and international scene starting with the Sahel (Lounnas 2021, 34).

Recent years have witnessed a retreat in Algeria's presence in the Sahel region. Moreover, the previous crises since the collapse of the state in Libya and its failure in Mali, then French military intervention (Operation Serval) and French combat operations (Operation Barkhane) brought about a delayed and lower-level engagement from Algeria. However, Algeria's tolerance for risk in the region appears to have limits. In fact, the shifts in the regional security environment presents the greatest challenge. Shortly after an internal political struggle, and constitutional and institutional reforms in the aftermath of the nationwide protest movement *Hirak* in 2019, the new President's administration intervened intensely and immediately, in Mali, Niger and Mauritania through periphery (or neighbourhood) diplomacy. This included managing bilateral relations through leader-level diplomacy, most prominently during two formal state visits to Algiers with the President of Niger in July 2021 (Algeria Press Service 2021b) and the President of Mauritania in late December 2021 (Algeria Press Service 2021a).

In response to concerns about Mali, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune rapidly sent his Foreign Ministers to Mali in the aftermath of the putsches in 2020 (Charfaoui 2021) and 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Community Abroad 2021). Thus, Algeria shows it is keen to always have the upper hand in favour of progressing the ongoing peace process in Mali by encouraging local peace and stability initiatives. Previously, Algerian efforts had been confined to supporting, mediating, and facilitating rather than taking on a strong leadership role in achieving, sustaining and enforcing peace. Indeed, although the conflict in Mali has preoccupied the Algerian security landscape over the past ten years, the French withdrawal will create geostrategic opportunities for a growing Algerian role in the Sahel region.

While French withdrawal could benefit Algeria, it could also es-





calate the terrorist threat in Mali, increasing political fragility and instability, and ultimately threatening Algeria's economic, security, and strategic interests in the region. Nevertheless, apart from a few narrow exceptions related to limited military interventions and strategic access, Algeria has always expressed wariness about getting bogged down in regional conflicts. It does, however, seek to increase its political influence across the Sahel region using all the tools at its disposal, from cross border economic cooperation with Niger, Mali and Mauritania to boosting these states' counter terrorism capabilities.

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THE ALGERIAN MILITARY DOCTRINAL SHIFT:  
WHAT WILL BE THE IMPACTS ON THE STATE ROLE  
IN THE REGION?

For several years, Algeria remained reluctant to send troops abroad, because of its fear of their men being turned into auxiliaries of a major power, which is a significant constraint on its aspirations for a prominent regional role (Ghilè and Khariief 2017, 35). Algeria has been absent from the French-led Barkhan operation against Mali insurgents since 2012 for obvious reasons. It has also not participated in the African anti-terrorism force, which includes five African armies collaborating on security issues in the Sahel and Sahara region with French help. Algeria has found itself marginalised due to its refusal to let its army deploy outside its territorial borders in conformity with the country's constitution (Bliidi 2020).

Consequently, Algeria intends to redraw the operational borders of its army, through a proposal within a draft of a constitutional amendment, which would allow sending military units to participate in peaceful and combat missions abroad. Still, article 29 from the current constitution states that 'Algeria shall not resort to war to impinge on the legitimate sovereignty and the freedom of other peoples. It shall endeavour to settle international differences through peaceful means.'<sup>6</sup> Moreover, another paragraph was added to this

<sup>6</sup> Article 29 of the people's democratic republic of Algeria constitution 2016 ([https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Algeria\\_2016?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Algeria_2016?lang=en)).

[172] article stating: 'Algeria within the framework of the United Nations, the African Union and the Arab League, and in full compliance with its principles and objectives, can participate in peace-keeping and restoration operations.' This proposed amendment is a shift in the Algerian military doctrine that, since the 1970s, has prevented sending military units abroad, according to a constitutional text (*Asharq Al Awsat* 2020). Under the proposed amendments by a committee of experts, the 'geographical area' of the tasks of the Algerian army will be presented for public discussion for the first time in decades, with the possibility of adopting a comprehensive review of the current principles that prevent its participation in any operations outside the country's borders.

While analysts considered that changing the combat strategy of the Algerian army is a necessity dictated by regional circumstances, the Algerian army has not fought combat operations abroad since the wars of the Middle East against Israel in 1967 and 1973. Indeed, this would be a major doctrinal shift in the country's approach to military and diplomatic issues (Echoroukonline 2020). Furthermore, many experts argue that the shift towards a fundamental review for the role of the Algerian army outside the border is a required 'adaptation' to a troubled neighbourhood (Khalid 2015). The importance of this doctrinal change is based on several reasons: protecting Algeria from the dangers of terrorist organizations in bordering countries, enhancing its diplomatic role, and the effectiveness of its foreign policy. The amendment also serves the vital interests of Algeria by building defensive policies based on bilateral agreements with adjacent countries, especially in the area of combating terrorist organizations (Dekhakhena 2021, 100). Given these facts, the 'new' doctrine adopted in 2020 emphasized strategic deterrence, and was also a message that Algeria can invoke military power with its neighbours in case of a crisis. This doctrinal change, however, was not a radical departure from the predecessor doctrine.

In this sense, the recent military doctrine was just an adjustment aimed at increasing the operational efficiency of the Algerian army and was not a major change that required the abolition of existing organizational structures and forms of operations. Hence, this



latest doctrine is designed to provide new improvements and adjustments to Algeria's predecessor doctrines. Hence, the constitutional amendments hint that Algiers has learned lessons from its mistakes in Libya since 2011 and would now allow it to be more proactive if another conflict erupted in a neighbouring state. Among the neighbouring countries that Algeria shares its borders with are Mali, Niger and Mauritania, all considered to be fragile states, likely to erupt in conflict. In such a scenario, Algeria could now intervene to deter potential threats or third-party military adventurism. Algeria's rivals may now more carefully weigh up their options and the potential consequences when it comes to intervention or interference either in its direct neighbourhood, or whenever its allies are under threat (Ghanem 2020). Studies have shown that perceptions are critical in the success or failure of deterrence efforts. In fact, deploying considerable military power directly in the path of state and non-state actors would not only break the predictability of Algeria's foreign policy, but also send out a loud and clear message. Considering its diplomatic history, military power and regional ambitions, this shift could permit Algeria to effectively perform its self-proclaimed role as a powerbroker and regional stabiliser – the first key step towards a shift in its foreign policy that is more in tune with Algeria's desire to be acknowledged as a regional security provider (Ghanem 2020).

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#### CONCLUSION

The African Sahel is an extremely strategic region for Algeria and one in which it has always played a major role. In fact, the importance of the Sahel region extends beyond local and regional concerns as well. Hence, the Sahel security issue is not only closely related to the security of the Maghreb and West Africa, but also serves as a lever in determining Algeria's geostrategic role. Needless to say, the fragile security situation in the Sahel coupled with political instability, weak governances and the transnational threats created a need for adaptation in the Algerian security approach towards the region, including a militarization of borders, which is neither expected nor desired. In particular, the outbreak of crisis in the Malian state in

2012 was unprecedented, involving for the first time, not only Tu-areg movements fighting against the Malian government, but also terrorist groups. A new security reality had arisen in the Sahel region, creating a new challenge for Algeria, which has adapted to respond to growing threats.

[174] This mirrors Algeria's approach to the Sahel region under the leadership of Tebboune and Algeria's strategic priorities for the region, which have been fairly constant through different national political systems. As for the Malian case, since the Sahel is considered by Algeria as its traditional backyard of influence, it has participated in all negotiations of Malian conflicts since the rebellion in the 1990s with Algerian diplomatic efforts succeeding many times in bringing the opposition forces to agree to the peace accords with the Malian government. Furthermore, it is likely that Algeria will continue to exploit its historically unbiased diplomatic weight, while hinting at the possibility of militarily intervening to protect its national security. Ultimately, it appears that Algeria seeks to maintain the same distance from all parties in relation to conflict, both locally and regionally. Likewise, Algeria's military intervention outside its borders and its scope depends on the nature of the threats to the security of its borders and its national security in general. In the absence of state threats such as a large-scale (regional) war, it is likely that Algeria – if it intervenes militarily – will be satisfied by penetrating short distances outside its borders, either to hunt down terrorist groups or to protect the tribes living on the edges of its borders, and thus prevent them from becoming rear bases for these groups. As for the possibility of participating in a multinational peace force, it will remain an option depending on the calculations of benefits and costs for Algeria's national security.

In conclusion, Algeria, as a regional leader, should strengthen its capacity development and regional cooperation through multi-lateral cooperation with neighbouring countries. Therefore, Algeria, with the most powerful military in the region, needs to be more active in the development and establishment of security cooperation and anti-terrorism mechanisms at the level of the African continent and the Sahel region. It is also necessary to accommodate



the needs of neighbouring countries, which simultaneously could reduce markedly the justification for external intervention in the Sahel.

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