

Renewed Diplomatic Leadership

By **IMAD MESDOUA**

POLITICAL ANALYST AT AFRICA MATTERS



IMAD MESDOUA is a political analyst at Africa Matters, a London-based consultancy. He specialises in the Maghreb (North Africa) and West Africa and monitors political, economic and security threats in these regions. He regularly provides on-air analysis as a guest commentator for the BBC, Al Jazeera and France 24. Imad has appeared before several government hearings. He previously worked as a journalist. He holds a master's degree from the University College London (UCL) and is fluent in Arabic, French, English and Spanish

It wasn't long ago that Algeria and its leaders were shunned by the international community for their no-nonsense approach to their handling of a domestic Islamist insurgency. But in the post-9/11 "War on Terror" world, Algeria's approach has been vindicated and its international standing rehabilitated.

Since the country gained its independence in 1962, Algeria has maintained its ability to conduct its affairs without outside interference. The country's foreign policy revolves around sacrosanct doctrines of national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, principles inherited from the country's staunchly anti-colonial and nonaligned legacy.

Algeria's military capability and its intimate knowledge of jihadi militancy, gained during its decade-long civil war in the nineties, make it a prime candidate for the role of "regional policeman". But Algeria's leadership has shied away from assuming an overly assertive leadership role in its traditional zones of influence, the Sahelian "backyard". In 2012, as western powers contemplated military action against jihadi groups in northern Mali, European and American diplomats lobbied Algeria to take part in a military action with no success.

The fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 and the subsequent collapse of Libya's institutions marked the beginning of troubled times for the region. Libya gradually became a safe-haven for hundreds of armed militia groups and jihadi organisations. In neighbouring Mali and Tunisia, terror groups were reactivated and emboldened by the free-flow of weapons. Throughout the Maghreb and Sahel regions, terror activities and the discovery of large weapons stockpiles raised alarms in Algerian security circles.

But it was the dramatic attack on the Tinguetourine oil and gas facility in In Amenas in early 2013, carried out by Mokhtar Belmokhtar's terrorist group, the al-Mua'qi'oon Biddam Brigade, which truly jolted the Algerian state as a whole. Even at the height of the civil war, Algeria's oil and gas facilities had remained inaccessible fortresses for jihadi militants. The attack triggered reassessment and prompted a revival of Algerian foreign policy in the Sahel.

In light of the region's ever-growing security challenges, Algeria has begun to come out of its shell, weighing in heavily on regional mediation and security initiatives. The country heads the African Union's Peace and Security Council and plays an important role in

regional security initiatives, such as the Joint Military Staff Committee of the Sahel Region (CEMOC).

Algeria also led the charge in the UN's efforts to end the payment of kidnap ransoms. In the last decade alone, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is believed to have amassed between US\$75 and US\$100 million in ransom money from the kidnapping of foreign nations in the Sahel region. Those ransom payments were often made by Western powers through third parties, a counter-productive practice known to infuriate Algerian security officials.

In the Malian crisis, Algeria's diplomatic efforts are already making an impact. The country is currently hosting another round of peace talks between the Malian government and various rebel groups (MNLA, MAA, HCUA) from the north. Achieving a lasting compromise between these actors, on the contentious subject of self-administration for Mali's northern regions, will not be easy. But this facilitation and the international community's pressure could lead to agreement.

In neighbouring Libya, much is at stake for Algeria. The entire Maghreb-Sahel region is vulnerable to cross-border militancy emanating from the Libyan "arms bazaar". With little to no policing of its vast and porous territory, Libya has become a launching pad for terrorist operations, helping jihadi groups in Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt to organise well-coordinated attacks.

Fearing a spill over, Algeria amassed an impressive military contingent (ranging from 25,000 to 50,000 troops) along its Libyan border. This build-up inevitably fuelled rumours that Algeria could be preparing to act militarily. But Algerian officials made it clear they have no intention of intervening. They also made it clear that Algeria would not support any foreign intervention initiative, arguing that such a move, however targeted, would potentially aggravate an already volatile political and security landscape. The country had already opposed the NATO campaign against the Gaddafi regime. Algeria has increased its military budget significantly since 2011. Despite this, Algeria is unlikely to risk its own domestic security by taking military action in Libya in the foreseeable future. Reinigorated, diplomats in Algiers still hope they can steer the region's key players away from simplistic military interventionism, towards inclusive diplomatic and political solutions. An uphill task to say the least but in a region threatened by all-out destabilisation, Algeria's diplomatic revival can only be good news. **E**