

SOME ASPECTS OF THE ALGERIAN-RUSSIAN MILITARY COOPERATION: THE FEATURES AND PROSPECTS*

Abstract: *The article examines the military cooperation between Algeria and Russia, which is of key importance for bilateral relations. The cooperation between the two countries intensified and received a new impetus during the presidency of Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika and Vladimir Putin. In a short time, Algeria became the largest buyer of Russian weapons in the Middle East and North Africa, which, together with the revenues from the sale of oil, strengthened Algeria's position and increased its influence in the region. At the same time, military cooperation with Russia had a significant impact on the development of political relations between the two countries. Algeria gradually became an important strategic partner for Russia in North Africa. In presenting the Russian-Algerian military cooperation, it is important to highlight certain aspects that have had both positive and negative effects on this partnership during different periods. These aspects include a shared desire for strengthening positions, as Russia and Algeria have shown a mutual interest in bolstering their positions and influence in the Middle East and African region; political cooperation and similarity of positions on a number of international issues; and the Russian-Ukrainian war, which had and has some impact on military cooperation.*

The current trajectory suggests that there are no apparent factors that could impede the deepening of the existing relationship, but taking into consideration the new geopolitical developments in 2022 related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and anti-Russian sanctions, Russian-Algerian relations will undergo a qualitative transformation. The article presents a novel approach to examining the potential for military cooperation between Russia and Algeria, taking into account the above-mentioned circumstances.

* Ph.D, leading research fellow in Institute of Oriental Studies NAS RA. Research interests: Modern and contemporary history of Algeria, Arabian Nationalism in 20th century.

mmcsar@gmail.com

* Received April 17

Reviewed May 15

Accepted June 6

Keywords: *Algeria, Russia, arm deals, Ukrainian war, military cooperation.*

Introduction

Algeria's relationship with Russia and the Soviet Union dates back to before Algeria's independence and continues today, particularly through the military, despite the fact that the collapse of the USSR and the Algerian civil war froze Russian-Algerian relations for almost a decade. After Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika came to power in 1999, the two countries became closer, and during the presidency of Vladimir Putin, relations were further strengthened.

The revival of relations allowed Moscow to regain its position in the Maghreb, expand its presence in the Mediterranean region, and become more actively involved in the economic and political life of Africa. The rapprochement with Moscow contributed to the strengthening of Algeria's position in the region and in the international arena. The two countries generally held similar viewpoints on many international political issues. However, these relations are based mainly on military cooperation, despite the fact that both Algeria and Russia have opportunities for cooperation in multiple economic fields, such as the energy sector and trade.

The economies of both countries are highly dependent on hydrocarbon sales and revenues. In the 2000s, along with the increase in oil prices, the financial capabilities of Algeria increased too, thanks to which it was possible to invest billions of dollars in the military sector. Algeria became the leading country in Africa with its military expenditures during 2008-2012, and took the 6th place in the world among arms importers (Shay 11), the majority of which are purchased from Russia.

Algeria has an essential role for Russia's policy not only in the Middle East but also in Africa. Bilateral ties have deep historical roots. The Soviet Union supported and provided military aid¹ to the National Liberation Front (NLF)¹ during the war

¹ The National Liberation Front was created on November 1, 1954 as a result of the merger of several small political groups into a nationwide organization that led the armed struggle for Algerian independence from France. (Ruedy, 160-161).

of independence (1954-1962). In 1962, the USSR established diplomatic relations with the Republic of Algeria, laying the foundation for many years of fruitful cooperation in the fields of trade, energy, and defense. In addition, dozens of Russian military advisers, engineers, and specialists in various fields have a long history of work in Algeria, particularly in the health sector, while thousands of Algerian students, some of whom have been elevated to the post of minister, have attended former Soviet universities and institutes.

It should be noted that Algeria also sought to cooperate with the Soviet Union in various fields. Algeria's relations with the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), the most important direction of which was military cooperation, resulted

from Western countries' restrictions on arms sales to Algeria. During the period of 1962-1989 Algeria acquired about 11 billion dollars' worth of modern weapons from the USSR, including airplanes, tanks, weapons, ammunition, etc. (Mokhefi 57, Barth 2), which were purchased for the credits provided by the USSR. The USSR also provided loans for the construction and development of heavy industry in Algeria, as well as for the production of equipment (Ghanem 111).

Russian-Algerian relations. Putin's era

Algeria's relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated in the 1990s as both countries faced internal challenges. In 1991, a civil war began in Algeria, which continued until 1999. Russia also had to deal with the complex reality created as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which required the need to reconstruct the economic and political system. The global system transformation caused by the dissolution of the Soviet Union also had a crucial impact on the reformulation of the foreign policies of Algeria and Russia, and the new geopolitical shifts could not bypass bilateral relations.

The revitalization of relations between the two countries was re-established in 1999 after Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika was elected president of Algeria and Vladimir

¹ The National Liberation Front was created on November 1, 1954 as a result of the merger of several small political groups into a nationwide organization that led the armed struggle for Algerian independence from France. (Ruedy, 160-161).

Putin was elected president of Russia. The latter took steps to restore bilateral relations, and as a result, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov visited Algeria in 2000; already in 2001, Algerian President Bouteflika visited Russia.

Putin and Bouteflika signed a memorandum of strategic cooperation¹ in Moscow. In addition, the two sides negotiated the resumption of Russian arms sales and the modernization of Algeria's industrial sectors, including the fuel and power sectors (Katz, 152-153). The visit of the Algerian president to Russia gave new momentum to relations between the two countries.

President Vladimir Putin made an official visit to Algeria on March 10, 2006. It was the first visit of a high-ranking Russian official to this African country since Nikolai Podgorny's² visit in 1969 (Hamchi, Rebiai, 259). As a result of the two-day visit, Russia and Algeria signed four cooperation agreements, including an intergovernmental agreement on trade, economic, and financial relations and a document on Algeria's debt settlement. According to the latter, Moscow wrote off Algeria's debt worth 4.7 billion dollars in exchange for a promise to buy 7.5 billion dollars of new Russian weapons in the future (Shay 7), Algerian leadership delivered on the promise.

It should be noted that Algeria was forced to establish military cooperation with the Russian Federation because the country faced difficulties acquiring arms from Western countries due to the Algerian civil war and its aftermath. At the same time, Morocco, which also sought to strengthen its position in the region, relied on deepening relations with Western countries. This created an opportunity for Russia to establish military cooperation with Algeria and expand its influence in the region.

As for Russia, the latter activated its Middle Eastern and African policy in the 2000s and tried to strengthen its influence and assume a more active role in this region through Algeria. Moscow also hopes that arms sales and military cooperation

¹ See the full text of the agreement: Консорциум Кодекс, Электронный фонд правовых и нормативно-технических документов. (Consortium Code, Electronic fund of legal and normative-technical documents.). [Konsortsium Kodeks, Elektronnyy fond pravovykh i normativno-tehnicheskikh dokumentov.] <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/901794649>

² Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet in 1965-1977.

agreements will bolster Russia's position in Algeria, but its goal of establishing a naval base at the port of Mers al-Kabir still appears distant.

As a result, Russia accounted for 80% of Algeria's arms imports from 2006 to 2013, according to SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) (Congressional Research Service, 14.10.2021).

In 2007–2012, Algeria received 44 Su-30MKI (A) twinjet multirole air superiority fighters at a total cost of \$2.4 billion. In recent years, Russia has also supplied Buk-M2E (SA-17) and Pantsir-S1 anti-aircraft missile systems, attack helicopters, and heavy military cargo helicopters. In addition, Algeria has received more than five hundred T-90SA tanks since 2006. The best indicator of the importance of the Algerian arms market for Russia is the fact that it acquired the Iskander-E (SS-26) short-range ballistic missile system (Borisov, 47), which was also of strategic importance to Algeria, taking into account the regional rivalry with Morocco and the need for power balance. Besides, from the point of view of Russia, it would be some kind of leverage in future military-political cooperation.

It should be emphasized that the characteristic feature of Russia-Algeria relations in the 21st century is the intensification of cooperation in the energy and military spheres. Russia and Algeria have long had close relations in the energy sector, with energy trade being the mainstay of their bilateral economic cooperation. Both countries are major energy producers and exporters, and they have established a strong partnership in the oil and gas industry. Russia and Algeria have continued to deepen their cooperation in the energy sector through joint ventures and investments. For example, Russian energy companies such as Gazprom and Lukoil have been involved in exploration and production activities in Algeria, while the Algerian state-owned company "Sonatrach" has invested in Russian energy projects. The first fact is due to both the strong position of the two countries in the global energy markets as well as the increasing competition in the global energy market.

The activation of cooperation in the military sphere is due to multiple factors. One of the main factors is Algeria's need to modernize and strengthen its military capabilities, particularly in the face of regional security threats, instability, and a

strained (sometimes even hostile) relationship with Morocco. Algeria has faced significant security challenges in recent years, including terrorism, cross-border smuggling, and regional conflicts, which have prompted it to enhance its defense capabilities. Thus, Russian-Algerian relations are focused on two main areas: arms and energy cooperation, which also had an impact on the identification of political positions.

There are two significant facets of the political cooperation between Russia and Algeria in which their approaches are akin: their stance towards the "Arab Spring" and their joint efforts in combating global terrorism. The events of the "Arab Spring" led to the deepening of differences between Russia and Western countries.

Russia strongly opposed the interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries, which was in line with Algeria's position. As is well known, Algeria criticized the invasion of NATO forces in Libya, which they believed would contribute to regional instability. The Libyan crisis and its aftermath had an impact on Algeria's approach to the Syrian crisis, which aligned with Russia's position (Hammich, Rebiai, 268). The Libyan crisis had a notable impact on Algeria's stance towards the Syrian crisis. Algeria, which had advocated for a political solution to the Libyan conflict, adopted a similar approach to the Syrian crisis. As a result, Algeria has supported a political solution to the Syrian crisis, rejecting any military intervention or external interference in the conflict. Additionally, Algeria has sought to promote dialogue and reconciliation among the various Syrian parties to resolve the crisis peacefully. Based on the current analysis, there appear to be no identifiable factors that would impede the continued intensification of the existing relations.

Military cooperation in a new reality

The Ukrainian crisis has cast a shadow over Algeria and thrust the North African country into unprecedented polarization between Russia on the one hand and NATO and European Union member countries on the other, especially over energy and military cooperation.

The Russian-Ukrainian war has had a complex impact on Russia's relations

with Algeria. Algeria has traditionally been a key customer of Russian military equipment, and the conflict has had significant implications for this relationship.

On the other hand, the conflict has also highlighted the risks of relying too heavily on Russian military equipment. The conflict has raised concerns about the reliability of Russian military technology as well as the political risks associated with relying on a single supplier. This has led Algeria to diversify its sources of military equipment, with the country increasingly looking to countries such as China as alternative suppliers. China is gradually becoming an important military partner, thus reducing Algeria's dependence on Russia, which remains Algeria's main arms supplier. In 2012–2016, Russia's arms sales to Algeria increased by 4.7% compared to 2007–2011 (Zoubir, Hamitouche, 215). Algeria's arms imports were 64 percent higher in 2016–20 than in 2011–15, making it the sixth largest arms importer in the world. Russia remained the largest arms supplier to Algeria in 2016–20. Russian arms deliveries included 16 combat aircraft, 42 combat helicopters, and two submarines. Other notable deliveries to Algeria included two frigates from Germany and two frigates from China. (SIPRI, 2021.) At the same time, military cooperation with China includes the training of Algerian officers in Chinese military academies. The two countries also cooperate in the field of security and in combating international terrorism (Zoubir, Hamitouche, 215).

In addition to its impact on the military equipment trade, the conflict has also had broader implications for Russia's relationship with Algeria. Algeria has traditionally been a supporter of Russia on the international stage, with the two countries sharing a common interest in preserving sovereignty and opposing intervention in internal affairs. However, the conflict has led to tensions between Russia and some members of the international community, including the United States and the European Union. This has created a difficult balancing act for Algeria, which is seeking to maintain good relations with both Russia and the West.

The Russian-Ukrainian war has had a significant impact on Russia's military industry, both in terms of its economic and technological development.

The war had negative economic consequences, particularly in terms of

sanctions imposed by the international community. The United States and European Union have imposed a range of economic sanctions on Russia, including restrictions on exports of military equipment, which have limited Russia's ability to trade with foreign countries and negatively impacted its military-industrial complex. Additionally, the war has led to increased military spending, which has placed a strain on Russia's overall economic resources.

At the same time, the sanctions imposed on Russia as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the withdrawal of Russian gas and oil from Europe significantly increased the role of Algeria as an alternative gas supplier. In 2022, according to the data of the first five months, revenues from gas sales amounted to 21.5 billion dollars, while in 2021, in the same period, they were \$12.6 billion (Al-Monitor, 15.11.2022). This fact prompted the USA and EU countries to intensify their diplomatic efforts, the main goal of which was to ensure the volume of gas supply.

In October 2022, the lawmakers, under a bipartisan group of Congress members, urged Secretary of State Antony Blinken to punish Algeria in accordance with the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act¹ for trading arms with Russia (Asharq al-Awsat 31.10. 2022). It should also be noted that several US security delegations visited Algeria during 2022, including one led by Brett McGurk, the US National Security Council coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa, and one led by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs Chidi Blyden to co-chair the US-Algeria Joint Military Dialogue. Particularly noteworthy was the visit of US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to Algeria (Arabic Center Washington DC, 01.25.2023), the main purpose of which was to reduce the level of cooperation with the Russians, reduce tension in the Maghreb region, and ensure gas supply to Europe. Visits by high-ranking US officials to Algeria and possible sanctions will have some negative impact on Russian-Algerian relations in one way or another.

In 2022, France made efforts to improve and strengthen its bilateral relationship

¹ The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) is a United States federal law that imposes sanctions on Iran, North Korea, and Russia.

with Algeria. In August, French President Emmanuel Macron visited Algeria with a large delegation, which was aimed at restoring ties that had deteriorated in the previous year after a series of announcements by Macron (Le Mond, 25.08.2022)¹. The director of the Geneva-based Research Center for the Arab World, Hasni Abidi, referring to the visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to Algeria, said "Algeria has excellent historical relations with Russia. But after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Algeria does not want to be seen as an agent of Moscow or part of some Russian axis of evil." Reestablishing ties with France could serve as a means for Algeria to demonstrate its status as a respected member of the international community. (BBC News, 10.12.2022).

As part of ongoing efforts to address regional security issues, a meeting was held between the leaders of the French and Algerian intelligence services. According to sources, one of the main topics discussed during the meeting was the situation in Mali (Al-Monitor, 15.11.2022) where a military coup took place in 2020. The Algerian authorities expressed concern over the volatile situation in their neighboring country, particularly following the withdrawal of French troops and the reported activities of the Russian private military company, the "Wagner Group". In this context, it is noteworthy Abdelmadjid Tebboune's recent criticism of the Russian presence in Mali given the current security situation in the region. The Algerian President expressed concern over reports of the Wagner Group's activities in Mali, which have raised concerns among neighboring countries, including Algeria. In an interview with the French newspaper Le Figaro, the Algerian president said. "The money that this presence costs would be better placed and more useful if it were allocated to the development of the Sahel, if it were invested in economic projects" (Le Figaro, 29.12.2022), he said, referring to the presence in the

¹ In 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron made several controversial statements regarding Algeria, which led to a deterioration of the bilateral relationship between the two countries. In a speech commemorating the 60th anniversary of Algeria's independence, Mr. Macron accused Algeria's "political-military system" of rewriting history and fomenting "hatred towards France"

country of mercenaries from the Wagner Group¹, whose landing in Bamako, in collusion with the Malian military authorities, has further destabilised Algeria's "backyard".

President Tebboune's unexpected statements show that the relations between Russia and Algeria are not as fluid as expected. The question arises as to whether the historical and strategic relations between the two sides have entered a phase of apathy, which is substantiated by the fact that the scheduled visit of President Theboun to Moscow did not take place in 2022. The reasons for the cancellation of the visit are currently unknown, despite the fact that it was actively being prepared for. In this regard, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Algeria Ramtan Lamamra said, "We have a large-scale cooperation program. Algeria and Russia are long-standing and important partners for each other. We are conducting a high-level political dialogue, and we hope that the visit of President Abd al-Majid Theboun to Russia will be the beginning of a new phase in our relations" (Ria Novosti, 11.11.2022).

The decreasing indicators of trade can also be considered a setback in Russian-Algerian relations. Although Algeria is presented as one of Moscow's main trade and economic partners in Africa, trade relations between the two countries are insignificant. Despite the fact that bilateral trade has steadily increased over the years, it is nevertheless worth noting that in 2013 it amounted to only 1.318 billion dollars, while the trade turnover with the USA was 4.947 billion dollars and with European countries was 49.281 billion dollars (Mokhefi, 57). In 2016 and 2017, bilateral trade between Russia and Algeria amounted to 3.97 and 4.63 billion dollars, respectively, and already in 2020 and 2021, it decreased to 2.91 and 3 billion dollars (Al-Monitor, 15.11.2022).

Conclusion

Therefore, despite the fact that Russia and Algeria are strategic partners, military cooperation remains the key direction of their relations. However, the

¹ The Wagner Group is a Russian private military organization accused of mass killing civilians in Mali. Mali: Independent rights experts call for probe into Wagner Group's alleged crimes. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1133007>

Russia-Ukrainian war and the crisis in relations between the West and Russia undoubtedly cast a shadow on relations between Russia and Algeria.

The Russian Federation has come under unprecedented political pressure and economic sanctions since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The prolongation of hostilities in Ukraine and the lack of significant success on the frontline not only raised questions about the effectiveness of Russian weapons but also caused significant problems in the military industry, with a negative impact on Russian arms supplies. In addition to supplying and logistical difficulties, the Russian defense industry, as a result of the sanctions, is facing problems in acquiring components, which can also be an obstacle to ensuring the volume and quality of arms production, affecting export opportunities as well. Recently, the active political engagement of Western countries in Algeria, particularly the USA and France, has also had a serious impact on Russian-Algerian relations. Algeria has historically maintained strong relations with Russia; however, in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Algeria is keen to distance itself from being perceived as aligned with Moscow or part of any negative association with a Russian alliance. In order to showcase its standing as a respected member of the international community, Algeria considers the reestablishment of ties with France as a potential avenue.

Algeria, being one of the largest buyers of Russian weapons, will undoubtedly face certain problems. Taking into consideration the amount of Russian-made military equipment in Algeria and the long-term experience of using it, Algeria will likely continue to buy Russian weapons, despite the fact that their types and quantities may be less available due to production difficulties and the war in Ukraine. In this case, Algeria may look for new arms suppliers to meet its defense needs.

Bibliography

Abdelmadjid, Tebboune: "Il est urgent d'ouvrir une nouvelle ère des relations franco-algériennes". *Le Figaro*. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/abdelmadjid-tebboune-il-est-urgent-d-ouvrir-une-nouvelle-ere-des-relations-franco-algeriennes-20221229> (Accessed 29.12.2022).

- “Algeria forces Russia to make concessions”. *Al-Monitor*. Independent, trusted coverage of the Middle East (Accessed 15.11.2022)
- Barth, May. “The Algeria-Russia Strategic Partnership: An Assertive Geopolitical Move?” Brussels International Center for Research and Human Rights, Brussels, 22 March 2019. <https://www.bic-rhr.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/Algeria-ussia%20strategic%20partnership%20-%20Analysis%2C%20North%20Africa%20-%20official.pdf>
- Borisov, Timofey. *Russian Arms Exports in the Middle East / Russia Rising, Putin’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.
- “Consortium Code, Electronic fund of legal and normative-technical documents”. [Konsortsium Kodeks, Elektronnyy fond pravovykh i normativno-tehnicheskikh dokumentov.] <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/901794649>. (Accessed 11.11.2022). “France's Emmanuel Macron to mend Algeria ties as energy crisis bites”. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-62659181> (Accessed 10.12.2022).
- Ghanem, Dalia. *The “Comrades” in the Maghreb / Russia Rising, Putin’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.
- Hamchi, Mohamed and Rebiai, Samia. *Russian-Algerian Relations in Multipolarizing World / Africa’s Growing Role in World Politics*, IAFR, Moscow, 2014.
- Katz, Mark. “Russia And Algeria: Partners Or Competitors?”. *Middle East Policy*. Vol. XIV, N. 4, Winter 2007.
- “Macron begins three-day 'official and friendly' visit to Algeria”. *Le Monde*. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2022/08/25/macron-begins-three-day-official-and-friendly-visit-to-algeria_5994716_124.html (accessed 25.08.2022)
- “Mali: Independent rights experts call for probe into Wagner Group’s alleged crimes”. *United Nations, UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1133007> (Accessed 31.01.2023).
- Mokhefi, Mansouria. *Alger-Moscou: Évolution et limites d’une relation privilégiée, Politique étrangère 2015/3 (Automne)*, Éditeur: Institut français des relations internationales, p. 57 à 70, pp. 248, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-etrangere-2015-3-page-57.htm>
- “President of Algeria may visit Russia before the end of the year”. *RIA Novosti*. [Prezident Alzhira mozhnet posetit' Rossiyu do kontsa goda, Ria Novosti] <https://ria.ru/20221111/vizit-1830821261.html>. (Accessed 11.11.2022).
- Ruedy, John. *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation*, Indiana University Press, 2005.

“Russian Arms Sales and Defense Industry”. October 14, 2021, CSR Report, Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress, Congressional Research Service, <https://crsreports.congress.gov> (Accessed 14.10.2021).

Shay, Shaul. The Russia–Algeria Strategic Partnership / The Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS). <https://rieas.gr/researchareas/editorial/4756-the-russia-algeria-strategic-partnership>

“US Efforts to Impose Sanctions on Algeria Stir Debate”. *Asharq al-Awsat*. <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3961391/us-efforts-impose-sanctions-algeria-stir-debate> (Accessed 31.10.2022)

“US-Algeria Relations Remain Troubled, but Neither Side Wants a Break”. *Arabic Center Washington DC*. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/us-algeria-relations-remain-troubled-but-neither-side-wants-a-break/> (Accessed 01.25.2023).

Wezeman, Kuimova, and Wezeman. Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2021/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2020> (Accessed 16.04.2022)

Zoubir, Yahia and Hamitouche, Youcef. China’s Relations With Algeria. A Strategic Partnership? / The Politics of Algeria, Domestic Issues and International Relations, Routledge, 2020.