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MODERNISING ITS ARMY ALLOWS ALGERIA TO PLAY A MORE ACTIVE REGIONAL ROLE

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Following the bombing by the Egyptian air force of terrorist groups in eastern Libya – who claim affiliation with the Islamic State - in retaliation for the execution of Egyptian Coptic workers some voices in Italy, France and Egypt have called on the United Nations to mount a military operation against the north African country. Retired General Carlo Jean suggested such a force should include Egyptian and Algerian ground forces – acting to help stabilise respectively the East and the West of this quickly fragmenting country. As it is forced to take in thousands of illegal immigrants who are washed up on its southern shores or the island of Lampedusa which lies between Sicily and Tunisia, Italy has an important stake in attempting to ensure greater security in this central part of the Mediterranean. The apparent enthusiasm of the aforementioned some Western politicians and officials contrasts sharply with the reluctance of Algeria to intervene in Libya.

It is anybody's guess how an internationally mandated force might help stabilise a country from which the NATO backed coalition just walked away from after playing a key role in the overthrowing and murder of the erstwhile dictator Muammer Gaddafi in September 2011. The growing crisis in Libya is pushing Algeria ever more centre stage. Two years ago, Algeria joined the exclusive ranks of the ten largest arms buyers in the world: it became the most important buyer of weapons in Africa, accounting for 36% of total continental imports. In September 2013, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika appointed a veteran diplomat, Mr Ramtane Lamamra, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The former ambassador to Washington, the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity moved quickly to articulate a more layered foreign policy in a region which has become the breeding ground for terrorism and much more violent forms of smuggling, which includes increasing amounts of cocaine, from Latin America, weapons from the former Libyan's dictator's arms dumps and every form of consumer products from Asia which pour through the open sieve that is an increasingly anarchic Libya. Two years ago, the brief take over of the Algerian gas field of In Amenas sent shock waves through Algeria and the boardrooms of some major international oil majors. Today Libya has lost control of its borders. Tunisia, Algeria, Mali, Niger and Nigeria are battling to keep control over theirs.

The weapons buying spree Algeria embarked on a decade ago was driven by changing regional circumstances. High income from oil and gas exports encouraged a fast build up but what is new is that weapons do not only come from Russia but from western nations like Germany, Italy and the US. The Algerian army is engaged in a three pronged change which concerns the weapons it uses, the military doctrine it follows and its effects on domestic politics and economics which need to be replaced in their historical context. After independence Algeria built up conventional mechanised armed forces and opted for Russian equipment which was solid and cheaper than its western counterparts: T62 tanks, Mig21 and 22 and Antonov transporter planes, Sam2 air defence systems etc. The focus of defence was the frontier with Morocco, with which a long standing dispute over border demarcation in the 1960s escalated into a conflict over the international status of the Western Sahara after 1975, and the Mediterranean coast. In those early years after independence, Algeria was a self-conscious revolutionary Third World country, training the commandos of the African National Congress and the Palestine Liberation Organisation. The US, the UK and France did not hide their displeasure at what they viewed as Algeria's aggressive non-aligned foreign policy and refused to sell the country weapons.

The release of the US hostages held in Tehran – with the precious help of Algerian diplomats, changed American perception of a country it had long viewed as a communist stooge. Defensive C-130 transport planes were sold in 1981 and closer relations were sealed by President Chadli Bendjedid's state visit to Washington in 1985. The decision was also taken to build a pipeline from Algeria's Hassi R'Mel gas field to carry gas through Morocco to the Iberian peninsula as relations thawed somewhat with Morocco. The US gave strong backing to the project as they were unhappy with what they feared would become Europe's over reliance on gas from the former USSR. Algeria's state oil and gas company, Sonatrach came to be accepted, by its Western partners, as a dependable source of natural gas, a commodity whose importance in the international trade in hydrocarbons was growing fast. Algeria's bold experiment in economic and political reform stalled in 1992, plunging the country into civil war. An effective embargo on weapons was imposed by western countries, though the US did help Algeria protect its oil and gas fields from Islamist armed groups with satellite surveillance.

The collapse of the Soviet Union at that time made supplies of spare parts, let alone new weaponry more difficult to come by for the Algerian army. The Algerian leadership has never forgotten the virtual arms embargo it was subjected to, nor the fact that some of the financing of the Islamists guerrillas came from private Saudi and Gulf sources. Many in Washington and other European capitals convinced themselves that Algeria could well become the next Islamic state. But the army did not buckle under the strain, Algerian civil society, not least its women collectively said no to a shari'a state, the flow of gas was not interrupted. To the surprise of many, not least in the media, Algeria did not break apart. On 9/11, the head of Algerian security, General Tewfik Mediene was, by one of those great ironies of history, in the Pentagon when it was attacked. From being the black sheep of the west, Algeria became a country from which there was much to learn in fighting Islamic terrorism. Algeria today has shed its revolutionary leanings – Algiers is not longer the capital of every revolution or revolution manqué. It is a country intent on maintaining the regional *statu quo* maybe Algeria can teach us a few lessons in how to combat Islamic terrorism, surmised some in Washington. In 30 years, the wheels had come full circle.

As the country emerged from its nightmare, the conflicts in Kosovo, Iraq, Georgia and Libya all pointed to the emergence of a new asymmetrical type of warfare which required new weapons and a new military doctrine: Akram Kharief neatly summed up the situation which confronted the military high command in [Pourquoi l'Algérie est le premier importateur africain d'armes](#) (*El Watan Week-*

end Vendredi 30 janvier 2015) Helped by plentiful receipts of oil and gas, the high command set about thoroughly re equipping the army . Algeria had a military debt of \$4.5bn with Russia: during a visit of Vladimir Putin to Algiers in 2007, that was transformed into a \$7bn shopping list: Su30 and Yak 130 fighter planes, S300 PMU2 and Pantsyr S1 Air defence systems, additional Kilo submarines and frigates and the latest Russian tanks. Four years later, Germany signed a \$10bn contract to provide Algeria with Fuch2 tanks, frigates and Mercedes transport vehicles. Italy followed suit by selling one hundred Augusta Westland helicopters and a Landing Helicopter Dock while the US sold its ANTPS radar system. An agreement was signed, last autumn to build drones with South Africa, a country with which Algeria enjoys long standing political ties. A major program to train officers in the use of such weapons was put in place.

The attack of In Amenas speeded up changes already afoot. Cooperation with Mali and Tunisia has moved into top gear as Algeria re-emerged as an important diplomatic player in regional affairs. Since 2011 cooperation between the Algerian and Tunisian armies on their long boarder has always been good. The recently elected Tunisian president, Beji Caid Essebsi has enjoyed good relations with Algeria throughout his long political career and his first visit abroad was to President Bouteflika – not as would have traditionally been the case, to the French head of state. The focus of the Algerian army no longer is the boarder with Morocco but the country's long desert boarders with Tunisia, Libya, Niger and Mali. This is a complete turn around from twenty years earlier. Today security cooperation with the US is discreet but good. Algeria's relations with Egypt are also better than they have been for decades.

As the army has embarked on its massive buying spree, another question has come up: it is all very well to get the Germans to build a state of the art maintenance factory for the tanks they are selling to Algeria but how would such a unit fit into the country's broader industrial policy – a policy of which it is bereft? If Algeria wants to play a more active role in the region, it could do worse than modernise its economic policy. Following the halving of oil prices, the IMF and many Algerian economists have spelt out the economic reforms needed to reduce the "oil curse" which afflicts an economy unable to offer jobs to the many young unemployed. This would be akin to re-inventing Algeria. Changes in regional security and the advent of asymmetrical warfare is forcing the armed forces to modernise, become more professional and cooperate more with foreign countries. Similar reforms in the management of its economy are essential to buttress Algeria's position as an influential regional player.